

## Hoosick Falls HS Students discuss Workplace & Labor Issues on WAMC

When big box superstores come into a region, they offer low prices, large selection, and lots of full- and part-time jobs. Some of these jobs promise benefits and advancement, but others create “working poor” without a living wage, medical insurance or job security. **Are the employment practices of retail superstores a cost-effective model for the 21<sup>st</sup> century global marketplace, or a throw-back to 19<sup>th</sup> century?**



What began as a seemingly clear-cut issue for teacher **Jennifer McDonald's** Participation in Government students at **Hoosick Falls Central High School** soon became a nuanced lesson in economics and labor history as they conducted their Student Town Meeting on **December 20, 2005**. **Bob Ward**, Director of Research for the NYS Business Council and **Gordon McClelland**, Senior Associate with Cornell University's School of Industrial Labor Relations were joined by **Tom Cetrino** of the Public Employees Federation in a lively discussion with the students of how changes in employment practices in the retail industry harbinger similar changes in other fields.

The discussion was **moderated by Alan Chartock**, and aired on *The Speakers' Corner* in January. Audio, student essays, and photos are available on-line at [www.wamcstudenttownmeetings.org](http://www.wamcstudenttownmeetings.org).

The students used the nation's largest retailer – Wal-mart – as a case study, reviewing two recent films concerning various aspects of the company, and read a variety of news reports and magazine articles on the issue. They expanded their research to include the impact of labor unions on the workplace in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and what might be their role in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Specific evidence and examples regarding employee wages, medical insurance, pension plans and other benefits came from various other corporations, including General Motors, Starbucks, Cosco, and McDonald's. In the process, students soon learned that whether or not employers provided benefits has a direct effect on their lives in the workplace, now and in years to come.

America's love affair with consumer goods and its fairly high standard of living also came under scrutiny, as Jordan and Antonio, two of the students, commented: “Americans want what they want when they want it – and at a good price.” The students were extremely surprised how much of what's “expected” in today's workplace can be attributed directly or indirectly to organized labor, designed - as another student, Holly, pointed out - to equalize the power between employer and employee. The issues were all the more appropriate given the imminence of the Transit Workers' strike in NYC on the day of the taping. Most importantly, the students realized that there are no clear solutions to the questions raised, and that each proposed solution indeed may create its own set of problems and issues to be resolved.

Regarding their Student Town Meeting, **Hoosick Falls High School Principal Ed Balaban** indicated that “the students and teachers who have participated remain thrilled at their experience. Other students and teachers are eager to become involved. Another unseen benefit has been the blossoming interest in various aspects of broadcast journalism expressed by some students, and WAMC staff members' openness and desire to share their knowledge. (My thanks) for providing a real-world opportunity that has expanded the minds of a group of rural teenagers, and has fueled their academic flames to burn even brighter.”