

Maria Santana

Maria Santana is a recipient of this year's Joseph S. Murphy Scholarship for Diversity in Labor. Maria was raised in the projects of South Bronx and began contributing to her family's income at a young age, working in fast food restaurants, often "off the books." After witnessing and experiencing abuses common in the food industry, such as wage theft, sexual harassment, and intimidation, a CUNY education offered her a pathway to a better future. At the Borough of Manhattan Community College, she earned an Associate of Arts degree in Liberal Studies. Balancing work and economic hardship with her determination to stay in school was a constant struggle, but Maria persisted and earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in History at Hunter College.



In a course on women's history, Maria's class visited the site of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, which sparked her interest in the ways that unions fight for rights and protections for low-wage workers. She was shocked – and upset - to realize that labor history had not been covered during her high school education. She pursued her interest in history, becoming President of the History Club. On campus, she was involved in actions supporting CUNY and the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), the CUNY faculty and staff union.

Maria was excited when she learned that CUNY's School of Labor and Urban Studies offers *Union Semester*, a labor internship with a stipend, where she could simultaneously begin courses for the MA in Labor Studies degree. Her internship placement with the Policy and Legislative Department of the PSC, was especially gratifying, given her deep appreciation for her professors at CUNY. At the PSC, Maria engaged with members, organizers, and city officials. She helped organize and support union events on a variety of issues.

Through a "new organizers" training program, offered by Local 32BJ SEIU, Maria was able to experience some of the rewards and challenges of trying to organize workers in the fast food sector. Her goal is to work for a union, preferably in the food service sector, on organizing or other projects, and continue her studies of history. As a student in SLU's M.A. in Labor Studies program, she hopes to learn more about ways that unions can most effectively connect with low-wage workers in industries such as fast food.