

Teachers Confront the Assault on Public Sector Unions: A Conversation with NYSUT's John Coverdale

by Alan Singer

The Fall 2010 elections opened an unprecedented season of nationwide attacks on public workers by newly elected governors and legislators. Thanks to the 2008 financial crisis wrought by Wall Street and Washington, state revenues fell some 30% and budget deficits soared. In Wisconsin, Ohio and many other states, elected officials took the opportunity to shift blame for these deficits onto the pay, pensions, and collective bargaining rights of teachers, police, firefighters and other public employees. New York State United Teachers is one of the largest unions in New York, representing over 600,000 K-12 public and university educators, administrative support employees, food service workers, bus drivers, and health care providers. Of these, NYSUT's Nassau County, Long Island Region represents 28,000 members, including many at Nassau Community College, Pratt and Long Island University. John Coverdale has been Nassau NYSUT's Regional Staff Director for the past six years. Raised in Bayport by parents who moved to Long Island under a minority recruitment program for teachers, he served two terms as Bayport's school board president. After stints in human resource management, county government, and teaching at Stony Brook University and St. Joseph's College, he joined NYSUT 17 years ago as a labor relations specialist in the Suffolk Office in Hauppauge. Alan Singer and Greg DeFreitas spoke with him at NYSUT regional headquarters in mid-March.

Q: What are some local issues that you have had to address over the last few years? In particular, how are they different from national and statewide questions?

JC: Long Island has a different economic environment. Bargaining is different. The standard of living here is different as well as the cost of living. All that affects positions that both sides take at the bargaining table. Separate and apart from that, I am not sure we are drastically different from other regions in the Northeast Corridor. Bargaining is driven by economics. On Long Island it is driven by the cost of living. It is also driven by an expectation that the quality of schools on Long Island is amongst the highest in the country. That has an impact at the bargaining table.

Q: In Nassau and Suffolk counties there are over 120 separate school districts. How does NYSUT deal with having to work with all those different districts and all those different contracts?

JC: We are used to it at this point. It is a very individualized environment, on one hand, and, on the other hand, it's not drastically different. Both sides sit down and they discuss their specific terms and conditions of employment related to their school district or organization, and we don't change that. We work within that process.

Q: East Meadow teachers have a very contentious relationship with some of the members of the local school board and they were without a contract for something like three years. How did the central union try to support the East Meadow teachers?

JC: Yes, you are correct, they were without a contract for three years. As a matter of fact, they had a rally in East Meadow, you may recall. About 2,500 people attended, which is what I think sort of helped to turn the corner – and allowed both sides to refocus the discussion on negotiations. It is the local's contract, not our contract. We offer help in the negotiation process. I have a great staff here, and the labor relation specialist assigned to East Meadow worked with the local to help them accomplish their specific needs in that specific school district.

Q: Are there specific services, for example legal services or accounting, that are provided for all locals?

JC: They are offered to everyone who is a member. As a member of NYSUT, you can receive a dental plan, legal plan, and vision plan. We also have financial consultants that are available to our membership, discounted purchasing, programs, those sorts of things.

Q: If a teacher is brought up on charges of misconduct, is it the local union that protects them or the state union? Who steps in and defends the interest of the individual teacher?

JC: The local union protects them initially through immediate representation in the district office with the superintendent or assistant superintendent depending on who is presenting the issue. Once we are notified of 3020-a charges. We process the paperwork. We facilitate the representation process which includes a staff attorney. It is sort of where we begin.

Q: What is a 3020-a charge?

JC: They are charges made under the state law that governs the disciplinary process. This process has to be followed to either discipline or terminate a teacher in New York State.

Q: The national union is participating in developing guidelines for the removal of teachers who are deemed inadequate. Why is the union cooperating in this process?

JC: We do not know where the discussion is going to go, but I think we should be cooperating in the discussion. At the end of the day, if you take the emotion out of it and the difficulty and the discomfort of the process for everybody involved, this is about the terms and conditions of employment and effective teaching.

Q: So the union is committed to effective teaching, not just to defending the members?

JC: Yes, and also, everybody that is brought up on 3020-a charges is not guilty. It is not different from our court system where you are presumed innocent until proven guilty. This is a process that you go through, and in the eyes of an arbitrator who makes the decision, or a panel who makes the decision, you may not be found guilty, as was originally presented by the employer.

Q: The union's job is to ensure due process?

JC: Yes, exactly.

Q: I know that NYSUT has been organizing demonstrations across the state including one at Hofstra University. What is the purpose of these demonstrations?

JC: The purpose is to speak out and let the governor and other elected officials know that we do not support the budget cuts that they are proposing.

Q: Do you know what the projections are for the cuts?

JC: They are not attractive at the moment. We suspect that we are going through a process with the governor's proposed budget that is being discussed by the legislature. We suspect there are going to be some changes, so it is difficult to react specifically right now. But what we know at the moment is not good news.

Q: Some districts on Long Island have already given notices to teachers. Why are they giving notices so early?

JC: Various reasons. In some cases, the contract calls for notice by a specific date if a teacher will not be able to return to a job next year. In some cases it is March 1st. In some cases, it is even earlier, sometime in February. As school districts go through the process of developing their budgets, they are trying to incorporate



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anticipated staffing levels into that process.

Q: How has NYSUT been involved in the political process in New York State in recent years?

JC: Most immediately through lobbying and establishing very, very clearly articulated relationships with elected officials at the state level. We have a lobbying department that does a spectacular job maintaining relationships and a presence in the capital. That is the highest level. We also impact the political process through the voice of our membership, either through VOTE-COPE or phone banks, call centers, and polling.

Q: Can you explain what VOTE-COPE is?

JC: It is a mechanism in which voluntary contributions are made to support the political needs of our membership and to support the ongoing discussions with elected officials regarding the things that we value.

Q: Does NYSUT have particular friends on the Nassau County, politicians who deserve recognition because they have fought for rights of teachers?

JC: We do not do that much at the county level. Most of our political relationships are with the statewide elected officials, assemblymen and so forth. But the county legislature as such, we do not deal with them., with the exception of acting on behalf of our members at Nassau Community College.

Q: There has been a lot of discussion about tenure and seniority rights. While a lot of it is focused on New York City, any decision that is made on tenure and seniority in New York City, where 30% of NYSUT's membership works, is going to have broader repercussions. What has been the position of NYSUT on teacher tenure and on seniority rights?

JC: This is an interesting period of time, and those discussions are also taking place with regard to performance appraisal, teacher evaluation, and tenure. Tenure has been reformed, and we were part of that discussion. Now the discussion is being revisited and we have to continue to be part of it.

Q: What is the official position of the union on seniority?

JC: That is a broad question, in part because the seniority discussions are being affected by the last-in, first-out debate and the desire by some to change that so that school districts or employers in general, at least according to Mayor Bloomberg, would have the right to terminate people regardless of their seniority, without seniority being part of the decision. That is something that we do not support.

Q: There is lots of criticism these days of teachers and their unions by these organizations that proclaim themselves proponents of educational reform. People are hurting in the recession. If you were in a line at a grocery store, how would you respond if you heard somebody say: “Why should the older, more senior teachers have their jobs protected? You know, my taxes should be going just to the most effective teachers. Why shouldn’t schools be able to lay off people just based on what the school says are the effectiveness criteria of the teachers?”

JC: I think that can be achieved without what appears to be draconian measures. If the evaluation process is allowed to work as it is supposed to work, we would never get to that place. Additionally, there is an assumption in the minds of some people that I think is extraordinarily unbalanced, that the more senior you are, the less likely it is that you are doing a good job.

Q: Part of the problem is that senior teachers get paid two to three times what the young teachers get.

JC: But that equates to age discrimination. If this process that we are discussing is largely focused on pay, which I suspect it is, in some circles at least, that is discrimination.

Q: Why are the salaries so disparate? In New York City, \$45,000 is a starting salary. I think \$102,000 is the top for someone with the highest education and 22-year longevity. Why are we looking at more than double salaries, and again with benefits and pensions, it is probably almost three times the cost? How did the system end up this way?

JC: It is driven by pay for experience, experience as it equates to higher-quality teaching. The system is also driven by the continued acquisition of education. Salary schedules are driven by experience on one axis and on the other axis by continued advancement through education.

Q: This system was not created by the union. This whole system was put together in the ’70s because of the financial crisis then. New York State, in all the districts, said to teachers, “Take a freeze, and as you work longer,

you will get a raise later.” In a system that was not put in by the union, but by the local governments and state governments, the bill is now coming due. You have senior teachers making considerable sums of money who worked for many years at significantly lower salaries. One of the things that I have always said is, “You’re right. The disparity’s too great. Pay everybody on highest level and remove the disparity. But the state and the districts do want to do that.

JC: Both of my parents are educators, retired educators, and I recall them having a discussion as they reflected back upon their own careers, which in both cases started in 1960, and they said they felt, “If we ever got to the point of \$10,000 in combined income, we’d be rich.” And I always remembered that. I thought that was kind of fascinating. From my perspective, two people working and making \$5,000 apiece, or something along those lines, whatever, however it might have broken down sounds strange.

Q: I was laid off as a teacher in 1975 and I got a job in the Transit Authority. I was making \$18,000 in the Transit Authority as a bus driver in ’1978. When I went back to teaching, I took a cut to \$11,000, because in the Transit Authority, after a year you were at maximum, and in teaching they put me back to Step 1. Eventually I got credit for everything I had before. But on the day I left Transit I went from \$18,000 to \$11,000, because everything had been frozen for three years. It was the union that ultimately secured for us back pay, pension credit, and the proper salary step.

JC: In many other professions where there are salary schedules, you get to the top step in much less time. Police come immediately to mind.

Q: The other thing that worries me is a national push through the Gates Foundation and the Obama Administration to essentially deprofessionalize teaching. They are targeting certifications and promoting people coming into the job without training and basically staying on a temporary basis. In Teach for America they work for two years and they leave. They will never become experienced teachers. To me it seems they want to break the union because it stands in the way of deprofessionalizing teaching. How does the union see what is happening?

JC: I think it is become relatively clear that if there is no strong body or group or organization standing at the doorway, you would have unfettered access to some of these reform attempts. This is an interesting time for unionism, not just teachers, but the things that are happening throughout the country – Wisconsin, Ohio,

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Florida, – this is a critical moment for people that are involved in the union movement. We are facing a very unfair question: whether we’re going to be the greatest generation of unionists or the last generation of unionists. To me, the threat to unions is very, very powerful. I mean, the tenor of the discussion right now is such that it is not unreasonable or absurd to think that unionism, as we have known it, may not exist at some point in the near future.

Q: In the private sector, only 5% of employees are unionized. I think one of the reasons why teachers and public sector workers are so vulnerable is so many private sector workers are not union members and they do not see why they should support teaching unions. How has the union addressed the problem of the demise of private-sector workers in unions?

JC: Certainly, it has been a reason for the erosion of support. Those people are thinking entirely as taxpayers now, as opposed to unionists. And while they are entitled to do that, it has contributed to some erosion. We are having a workshop here tonight; the title is “Talk Back, Fight Back.” The focus is regaining some leverage in the discussion.

Q: Back to the supermarket line. You are in line with people who have lost their jobs and they say, “Why should the union people get paid what you get paid? Why should you have these defined benefit pension plans when taxpayers who pay your wages are hurting?” How do you think your members would respond?

JC: First of all, if you sense that the person’s very uninterested in being educated, we do not have the discussion. There are certain people where there is really no point in talking. I’m not saying you cannot have differences of opinion at the end of a reasonable discussion, that is what democracy is all about. But we have spent a lot of time, and will continue to do so, educating our members about awareness, self-awareness, how they are perceived. We probably dropped the ball somewhere, and not just teachers, but I think a lot of unions dropped the ball somewhere when it comes to public image and public relations. The model that unions are using to introduce themselves to the public needs to change. It is an age-old, decades-old model that worked at one time that is not working today, and I think we have been slow to change it.

Q: The public sector is the only place where unions have flourished in the United States. Many working people have been beaten down, they’ve seen their defined pension benefit plans killed or reduced, their wages frozen or reduced. Rather than saying we should all have union benefits, we should all have defined benefit pension plans, we should all have some job security, jealousy starts to come in and people start to say, “Well, if I don’t have it, why should you have it?” instead of turning on employers and saying, “Why don’t we have what unions have?”

JC: I do think that is a part of it, but I also think that some of the discussion is driven by one factor that is usually unknown. The presence of unions has a significant impact in non-unionized environments with regard to wages and terms and conditions of employment. Most people do not realize that. An employer that does not want a union on its premises tends to adjust its wages and its benefit packages and its terms and conditions of employment in a way to help ensure that you do not have a union. In that sense, all workers benefit even when only some are union members. We could do a better job at letting people know how hard unions, from the AFL-CIO on down, actually lobby with regard to workplace issues, with regard to protections for working people, employees of all levels in all states, even when they are not unionized. When we are talking about reintroducing ourselves to the public, those are the things that we have to focus on. If we begin to focus on those things, we will win more of these supermarket discussions. You will convert some of the people. It is a campaign. It is going to have to go on for quite some time, and it is one, two, three, five people at a time that we are going to affect. We are not going to wake up tomorrow and see polls in the paper, and people say, “Oh, you know, never mind. I take back some of my negative comments.”

Q: I worry that some of the younger teachers I work with do not have a sense of what the union does. They are worried because they are getting pink slips – and want to know, “What is the union going to do? What does the union do?” They do not have a clear sense of what the union does.

JC: We probably also have to do a better job introducing the union to the newer members, the young teachers that you have just

mentioned. In the old days, people knew about the union and flocked to the union. They needed the union for different things. The people making \$5,000-\$6,000 a year and working two part-time jobs in the summer and working a part-time job after work, relied on the union for different things than the people who are new to the profession today. Today the wages have improved to a point where it is sort of a more livable wage. But in the days that I mentioned specific to my parents, that was not necessarily a livable wage. You could make it, but if something happened and you needed a tire, you needed something, you were trying to figure out, how was I going to put this together?

Q: My wife and I were both teachers. We were living check to check.

JC: God forbid you had an emergency. You didn't take the job to make money. You took the job for different reasons. Today's new teachers are better paid, but I submit they need the union for different reasons. No fewer reasons, but they need the union for different reasons. The problem is the model that we have used to present the union to them has not succeeded to the degree that it needs to.

Q: How can the union reach them in a better way?

JC: In this office, we have spent a lot of time doing workshops. We have spent a lot of time on new member development. We have spent a lot of time saying, let's talk – let's socialize. We are getting on Facebook and we are doing all the newer methods of communicating. Once we get them here, we have to introduce ourselves to them in a different fashion. I don't know that as unionists we ever got to the point where we presented ourselves in a fashion that says, "This is about you and your needs" as opposed to "Come and listen to us tell the war stories."

I am working on revising a workshop right now, our political action workshop, which, frankly, has been very poorly attended in the last couple of years. And the title of our revision is probably going to be "This is Not Your Father's Political Action Workshop." I think the title alone will get some people to come in. But we are constantly, constantly searching for new and different methods of presenting ourselves to our younger members. It is a different balance, more based on what they need, whether it is tenure, certification, or getting your Master's degree, in dealing with all those issues, helping you with that sort of thing, first and foremost. If you can do that, that is a lot like friendships and relationships. If somebody does something for you to help make your life easier or help make your work life or personal life easier, you are going to remember that, as opposed to somebody saying, "You come into a meeting because you have to and listen to us talk about what happened in 1970." While history is important – it can't be the focal point of today's discussion.

Q: One of the complaints that expressed by one of the younger teachers was that the building representative acts like "they represent the union to us, and they should be representing us to the union."

JC: I do not disagree. I think it ties in with what we just discussed. I don't mean to be critical. This is not an individual thing. It is systemic. The model we use has been transferred from generation to generation, and not enough time has been spent reflecting on what changes, if any, need to be made, whether we are still using the most effective methods of communicating with our membership. As ugly as the general environment is right now, Wisconsin comes to mind, there is a great opportunity for some metacognition in this. We need to spend time thinking about our thinking, thinking about what works in this environment, thinking about what needs to be changed, thinking about how we are going to survive, thinking about how we are perceived, thinking about how effective we have been at getting our message out. What needs to be changed? Who should be delivering the message? How should it be delivered?

Even in the dire environment that we are in, I am hoping that it causes some heightened thinking about our process, about who we are, about how we introduce ourselves to the public. I will be very disappointed if that does not come as a result of this whole thing, because it is really all we can do.

Q: In Chicago, a dissident group of teachers, people who describe themselves as activists and reformists, have taken over the union leadership. They were elected. Is this a positive trend in the union? Is this a problem in the union? How should teachers on Long Island view what happened in Chicago?

JC: On the surface, I do not think anything good comes from further divisions. I would hope that the concerns of this group are presented and incorporated effectively into the larger group. The last thing we need is to be dividing ourselves any further and diminishing our numbers. However, I understand that some people identify closely with this new group, and they like the groups mission.. If people feel that they are not being represented and they cannot identify with their organization, that is what happens. I do not know if it is that they feel that they cannot identify with their organization or they feel that the organization does not identify with them. Either way, you will get an underground movement, and all it takes is one or two people to start it. While I do not fault them, I do not know that it is good as a whole. But I understand that if concerns are not being addressed, this is often where you end up.

Q: Nassau County, a high-income county, is now having its finances taken over by this overseer agency, NIFA. NIFA may impose a wage freeze to close an alleged \$176 million budget gap that the county has. They may

declare a fiscal emergency in order to do that. Do you think there is a fiscal emergency and do you think that wage freezes or cuts in teacher staffing and so on are the way to deal with the county or the state fiscal problems?

JC: I do not know exactly how the county defines fiscal emergency. It is no secret that traditional revenues are drying up, the economy is not good, and that this impacts collective bargaining. I do not know if NIFA will have jurisdiction over the contracts of employees that are not county employees. If they try to do it, that is going to be an interesting discussion in the courtroom. But they will have jurisdiction over county employees, collective bargaining will be impacted by jurisdiction, and there will be wage freezes and so forth. I think that the respective unions will have to take a look at the legalities affecting their rights. I suspect they will have support from unions all over Nassau County.

Q: In Nassau County as in New York City, where the mayor is talking about 5,000 teacher layoffs, there is a lot of talk by politicians about the need for shared sacrifice and public sector employees having to accept layoffs and/or wage freezes. NYSUT has held big demonstrations in Albany and elsewhere calling for a broader shared sacrifice, calling for an extension of New York's so-called "millionaire's tax," which is on the books until the end of this year. What is the NYSUT argument in terms of that kind of shared sacrifice?

JC: They are making an effort to balance the budget on the backs of working people. If the economy is as poor as everyone says it is, everyone should be sharing the pain. Throughout history, there has always been an imbalance, and right now the gap between haves and have-nots is wider than it arguably has ever been. But as a percentage of income, some of the wealthiest people pay less in taxes. Frankly, I don't know why we are so fearful of having that discussion. We were talking about power elitism and its influence. They talk about unions lobbying the government. I mean, the power elite may not have lobbyists per se, but when they decide they are not going to send their checks and their donations to political candidates, you know, effectively you get the same outcome.

Q: Many school districts in the metropolitan area have been responding to the recession by pushing for more privatization of school support jobs like food services and maintenance work. This often involves hiring outside, for-profit companies that replace unionized school employees with lower-paid, less experienced non-union substitutes - all in the name of supposed efficiency. How has NYSUT, both at local and regional levels, been responding to these efforts?

JC: We look at this on a case by case basis, and measure the impact privatization has on our members. Those jobs belong to our members first and foremost. Our reaction also depends on our suspicions regarding the motives of the employer.

Q: Is there anything else that we have not touched on that you care to add, either about the union, your job, or Nassau County?

JC: Just that these are interesting times. Every day when you walk in the office, you never know what you are going to face. Right now, you are dealing with the economy and layoffs. As you correctly noted earlier, school districts are going through the process of notifying people that there is a likelihood that they are going to lose their jobs. We keep getting phone calls and working to help them. At the same time, we are trying to organize and schedule rallies. There is so much going on at this point that it really, really has you thinking about issues, values, and reactions and what else needs to be done and what else can we do? In the office, we meet and we talk about it on a regular basis, daily in some cases. I am very deeply concerned about what is going on, not just here, but nationally. It will be even more frightening as we see the developments in Wisconsin. We do not know where that is going right now, but, I mean, is that going to happen in New York? Probably not, but it could.

Q: It won't happen the same way. But if they take away seniority, it would have similar impact.

JC: You can see the benefit of labor-management cooperation in these discussions. Where you have labor and management who have maintained an ability to sit down and discuss issues in a businesslike fashion – not personal, just businesslike – those are the places where you will see some outcome resulting in shared cost savings, a more positive economic environment, and fewer jobs being lost. It seems to me that at some point we will be able to point to this model, saying, "Well, this is how you get those things." It is very difficult when you have someone who is making one and a half, two times or more your salary who has not given anything back and points to you and says, "You know, I need you to do this." You have an odd dynamic. Human nature being what it is, we are less likely to do that.

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