Long Island Unions, Economic Development, And The Fight for Middle-Class Jobs: A Conversation with Labor Federation President John Durso

by Niev Duffy and Gregory DeFreitas

One in four working people on Long Island is represented by a labor union – a unionization rate more than twice the national average – that is surpassead by only three other metropolitan areas. Most of the Island's public and private sector unions pool their political and economic clout through the 250,000-member Long Island Federation of Labor. Like its counterparts across the country since the recession began, the Long Island labor movement has confronted mounting challenges from high unemployment and from budget-slashing political leaders.

John Durso is now in his seventh year as president of the Long Island Fed. He was elected to its leadership while serving as president of one of its largest and most ambitious member unions: Local 338. Begun by retail food workers in 1925, Local 338 was long a part of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). In 1997, under then-president Manny Laub, it became an affiliated district council of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW). Two years later, John Durso was elected its president. He expanded its organizing staff, moved its headquarters from New York City to Mineola, absorbed another union (Local 305) and thereby brought in many new members.

Within weeks of Mr. Durso's May 2005 election as president of the Long Island Fed, the RWDSU and UFCW joined several other large international unions that left the AFL-CIO to launch a new union coalition: Change To Win. So today he simultaneously leads the AFL-CIO's central labor council of Long Island unions, as well as an RWDSU/UFCW local now part of a rival national federation. The challenges posed by this situation were among the questions raised in this February interview at Local 338's offices by Niev Duffy and Gregory DeFreitas.

Q: How did you get involved in the labor movement and organizing? When you were young, did you know anything about unions?

JD: I began as a deli clerk at Waldbaum's Supermarkets in Merrick. I met Manny Laub, Local 338's business agent at the time, and we started talking and became fairly friendly. And then I had a number of different positions and I didn't see him for a number of years. Turns out he became the president of the union. When I saw him again, he asked me, one day, if I'd like to work with the union. I said, "Okay, when do I start?" I've been with Local 338 for 28 years now on staff, but a member since January of 1971.

But the truth of the matter is, you know, at one stage of my career, I had gone into management. I was a store manager for Waldbaum's. And my supervisor always said to me: "You really shouldn't be the store manager. You should really be the union rep." I expect a lot out of people. But I absolutely insist upon people's rights being upheld and on people being treated with dignity and respect. I think that's the basis for what my career has been: about trying to bring some dignity and respect to people, to help them. That's really how I got involved in it.

Q: Can the union-management relationship be beneficial to the employer or is it necessarily a conflictual relationship?

JD: You know, I tell employers all the time, "We have fundamental disagreements, but there is more that we have in common than that separates us." We have contracts with 250, 260 different employers in Local 338. And we tell them all the time: "We want you to make a profit. We want you to be profitable. It makes sense for you to be profitable, because it benefits our members. And when we negotiate a contract and I give you my word that we at Local 338 will live up to it, I expect you, the employer to live up to it." And where we can help, we help them. Where we have disagreements, we disagree, but we do it respectfully. And we try to make it non-adversarial as often as possible. But there are times that, you know, people go too far and then things happen.

For the most part, we've been very fortunate, over the years, to grow our organization. We've actually, in the past twelve years, had close to a 31% increase in our membership. We're one of the few locals that has grown over the past dozen years. And that's quite honestly, a credit to our staff, because they work very hard and they bring the word of what union membership can mean. You know, I talk all the time with our staff and with the people that we represent. If you don't feel it in your heart, you can't do this job and you shouldn't do this job. It's gotta be something you believe in. You can't just talk it, you have to walk it, you have to believe in it. And people know when you're a phony – they pick up on that. So, if you're not feeling it, you should find something else.

Q: Last Labor Day, you wrote an op-ed in The New York Daily News entitled "CEOs Are Winning and Labor is Losing: Dark Days for Working People." Within weeks, people were coming out in the thousands in Occupy Wall Street protests. Why did your union offer support to the Occupy Wall Street movement and encourage members to march with them?

JD: Well, I was so impressed with the people at Occupy Wall Street. Now, I have to say that, in any group, there's that fringe that will, quite frankly, in my opinion, make it bad for everybody. They'll do foolish things. Some, maybe they don't believe it or they just want the publicity.

But I think the real core of the people that occupied Wall Street are talking about us – about the community, about people forgetting about the middle class and people striving to reach the middle class but falling further behind. And we all know that the surest way to the middle class is with a union card. And, unions have been under assault for years, for decades. The young people that were in Occupy Wall Street, I thought were inspiring.

It was also good to see some of the older folks that were there, I mean, there were rich people, there were poor people, there were middle class, there were all kinds of folks there. Because working people have had enough. People have had enough.

You know, they talk about the 1%? Well, when that 1% has more than the other 99%, there's something out of kilter. And I have absolutely no problem with somebody who works hard and makes plenty of money. I think that's wonderful. That's a dream. But you can't do it on the backs of the people who helped you get there. You can't forget about the people who helped you get there and you have to be willing to share with the people who helped you get there.

Occupy Wall Street, I think, brought that home. Look what it did. It started a nationwide, a worldwide conversation. And, you know, people who said, "Oh, it's terrible, it's crazy, look at what they're doing." People are talking about it. A friend of mine, the other day, he says, "I can't believe that you were supportive of 'em." I said, "Why? What was wrong with that?" He says, "Well, why weren't they working?" But I told him, "They want to work. They want to have a job. And there were people there who gave up their job to be supportive of others. You know, you should be encouraging that."

It's sort of like people who complain about the ACLU. Well, isn't the ACLU all about the Constitution and protecting rights and why wouldn't you be in favor of that? How could you stand against that? These are your rights, people! And that's what these kids and these people were doing. They were standing up for us.

Yes, there were a couple of people who did some strange things, like that one person who climbed up and said he wasn't coming down until Bloomberg resigned. I couldn't believe it. I said to myself, "Oh, you fool, what you're doing is you're undermining all that good work."

But it was wonderful. Our folks brought food over and things like that, but they had plenty. It was organized chaos; it was great. One of the folks from the Jobs with Justice out on the Island was there, she worked every day – Charlene from Jobs with Justice. What an absolutely committed, wonderful young lady. She's the Executive Director of the Long Island Jobs with Justice and she's inspirational. She really is.

Q: Could you relate the A&P bankruptcy and wage cuts to the issue of Occupy Wall Street?

JD: Well, let me tell you a little bit about the A&P situation. That was a year and a half worth of really tough work. You have 41,000 people represented by 13 different unions with multiple health and welfare plans, pension plans. And it was coordinated by the UFCW through our international secretary-treasurer, Mark Perrone, who, quite frankly, is an unsung hero in this thing. He did an outstanding job.

You have 13 unions, so you have 13 union presidents, all Type A personalities, and to harness all of that into working to save one of the oldest supermarket chains in this country, because of their own self-inflicted mismanagement. They almost destroyed themselves and the other companies that they bought.

But we worked together, the 13 unions, with our professional advisors, to craft a program that included wage freezes, Some locals had wage cuts, some didn't, depending upon their particular contract. But what we all were able to do is we were able to save the health and welfare of our membership. Every pension plan was saved. There were even instances of increased contributions to pension plans and health and welfare plans.

We also managed to get a seat on the board of directors. Unheard of! A union being represented on the board of directors. And total transparency of their financial dealings.

Our members had to take some concessions. On personal days, sick time, vacation. But, in the end, we saved tens of thousands of jobs. And, hopefully, gave this company an opportunity to right its ship. Ron Burkle is coming in to be the chairman of the board of the newly reorganized A&P. He has a great background in supermarkets, so he knows this industry.

And this opportunity here relates to Occupy Wall Street. Each one took lots of collaboration to get it to work. There are 17,000 people in New York State who are employed by the A&P corporation. Thousands and thousands of jobs in New Jersey. Mostly all of the jobs have been saved,not all but the vast majority of them. There are a couple of stores that are being closed now. There's, I think, 14

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between Maryland and Connecticut. And there are six on Long Island – five of ours, one of Local 342. These stores were, unfortunately, on the edge of just not being profitable. And we're trying to save as many of those jobs as we can. Working with the company, as we speak, to continue to do that. But, overall, out of the total of 41,000 jobs, we'll probably be able to save 39,000.

But that's what the energy of Occupy Wall Street was about: not about corporate greed, but about fairness. And there were senior members of the various union who took cuts to save junior members jobs. That's cooperation. That's looking at the big picture. That's looking out for your fellow union member and that's very similar to what Occupy Wall Street was all about. Not about your own personal greed; about what's good for everybody.

Q: Turning now to Wal-Mart, what would you say to somebody who asks: "Why prevent Wal-Mart from opening a store here, when it would bring additional jobs to New York City?"

JD: We need jobs, but we need good-paying jobs and we need jobs with benefits. You know, Wal-Mart has a history of destroying neighborhoods, not building neighborhoods. The mom-and-pop stores that give the neighborhoods their character are often destroyed by Wal-Mart coming in. The demands that they make upon suppliers make it almost impossible for those companies to stay in business. Or they become so dependent upon Wal-Mart that they become, more or less, a subsidiary and then they have no independence.

So if Wal-Mart wants to come into the five boroughs, which they've been talking about, a lot of the members have decided they want to have a union. Sit down and talk to us, okay? But you cannot, you cannot continue to ravage the communities. You cannot continue to stop people from exercising their right of association and their freedom.

When a union organized the meat department in that Texas store, Wal-Mart closed it down. When workers organized a store up in Canada they closed the store. They have taken the attitude of squashing people's rights to associate with the people that they want to, to speak for themselves, stand up for themselves, to organize for themselves. These are fundamental rights that people have, but for Wal-Mart they don't exist. You have to live and die by their rules and that's not the American way. That's certainly not what we do around here.

So you want to come to the New York market? Great. We don't back Wal-Mart but, if they're coming in, we want them to be built union. You have to live like we live, you have to treat people properly. You have to respect their differences and you have to treat women the same way you treat men and you have to pay them the same and you have to give them the same chances for advancement. And you can't be telling a woman, "Oh, well, you're not getting the job because you're a woman and he's the breadwinner." This is not Ozzie & Harriet.

Q: In recent news reports about living wage demonstrations in the city, the RWDSU signs always seem to be very prominent. The union was part of the victories out here in recent years in Suffolk and Nassau counties. How's the new campaign in the city been going?

JD: Right, those were wonderful victories. The Living Wage Campaign is based on the idea that, if you're getting government money and you're being subsidized by the government and you're getting tax breaks, how do you have the audacity to say, "Give us your money, give us the public's money, but we're not going to pay people a wage so that they can live and shop in the areas in which they work"? Do you perpetuate poverty? That's wrong. That is a fundamental principle and the RWDSU and its leader, Stu Appelbaum, have been outspoken proponents. Dignity, respect, people's ability to earn a fair living.

You know, I was speaking to an economist out here on Long Island recently. I believe the national poverty level for a family of four is about $22,000; on Long Island, it's about $45,000. So, $7.25 don't cut it. $8.50 doesn't cut it, but it's a hell of a lot better.

I almost fell off my chair today when I saw that the editorial page of Crain's came out in favor of raising the minimum wage. But of course, they couldn't leave it at that; they attacked the living wage in their editorial, but they did come out in favor of a higher minimum. So that's a small victory, right?

And, you know, the minimum wage has certainly not been a deterrent to jobs or made companies leave the area. It's giving people an opportunity. You know, they just have to get their foot in the door and then they can work hard and move up.

But, $8.50 an hour – it's a better start. You're not going to Peter Luger's Steakhouse on $8.50 but, you know what? You can live a little bit better.

Q: According to a new study by the Fiscal Policy Institute, about 1 in 3 New Yorkers is either poor or what they call near-poor, with an income 200% of the poverty level or less. Even in a region like this, with an incredibly high fraction of the top 1%, with the highest inequality in the country! And, yet, 1 in 3 people poor or near-poor. So, are you surprised that people would challenge raising the living wage, or even the minimum wage?

JD: Sure, there's a real disconnect. I can understand why, in a time of recession and too few jobs, some workers feel that any jobs are better than no jobs – no matter how low the wages and benefits. But then we as leaders must fight to raise the standards of all workers. But, again, if your company is getting state money, you're getting the public's money, you have a responsibility. They're not investing their own money. They're investing our money. That's the part that gets me. There's the difference. What you do with your money, you have the right, you know? You have the collective bargaining agreement, you have to live by it, okay? But you want taxpayer money, you gotta do what's good for the public. That's our opinion on it.

Q: Are union workers having it especially tough during this recession?

JD: It's a very tough time. When the phone rings, it's never good news. It's always something. As I tell my folks all the time, "Nobody calls here to say, 'Hi, how are ya?'" They're calling here because there's a problem. And you have to understand that when you take the job. Nobody's calling you to tell you what a wonderful job you're doing. They're calling to tell you they're in trouble. And that's what we do. That's what our life is about, to help them.

Q: But you're clearly having some successes. As you say, Local 338 had a big jump over the last decade in membership. In the sectors that your union is strongest, there's been, over recent years, a growing number of immigrant workers. Of course, it has been a real issue for all unions and there have been a lot of changes in the AFL-CIO's positions over recent years. Could you talk a bit about your successes and challenges as a union in trying to deal with the immigration issue and the influx of immigrant workers on Long Island and in the city?

JD: Sure, sure. First off, as I tell my folks: we're not the INS. My job is not to ask you if you have papers. My job is to represent you if you're working at an establishment that we represent. That's my function and that's what I'm gonna do. Whether you're documented or undocumented, if you're working there, I'm gonna represent you. That's first and foremost.

Second, in the vast majority of places that we've tried to organize, undocumented workers – I hate the term "illegal;" no human being is illegal-- are so often doing the jobs that other folks don't want to do. They're not taking jobs from anybody. They're being part of the community. They're paying their taxes. And they live in fear every single day. And that's wrong.

The system perpetuates fear and exploitation by allowing immigrants to be intimidated and forced into the shadows instead of bringing them out into the light and giving them the opportunity to continue to be an active part of society. But, in our industry, the employers use it as fear tactics. You know, you go in to organize a place and you'll get the support of the undocumented workers. But the first thing the employer wants to do is say: "I'm going to call the authorities." Because there's no fine for them.

There's nothing: there's no real loss for them, there's no threat for them, because the government's not going to fine them or imprison them. Then they'll go out and find more undocumented workers to take their place. So there's no fear for them to strike back.

So it takes real courage for undocumented workers to stand up and stand together. And we look to help them, encourage them, educate them. Sometimes, we'll do all of that and they still don't want to be union. Okay, that's your choice. What we want is we want them to have a choice. We want them to have the ability to say, "I want the union," or, "I don't want the union." We don't want it shoved down their throats or to threaten them.

Q: Are you saying that, when they feel that there's union activity or discussion among the workers, that's when the employer threatens to call INS?

JD: Happens all the time. All of a sudden, they'll say, "Let me see your papers again." The same papers that they approved. Then they'll mysteriously find a problem with their Social Security card or whatever. Well, it was okay for the two years they're working for you; why not now that the union's here? They do it all the time.

And, because the laws are such that the employer can act with impunity, the immigrants become indentured servants. It's horrendous. I can't tell you how many drives that we've had that fear factor What are you gonna do? You can't hurt people. You're there to try to help them, not hurt them.

So it takes a real courageous soul to continue that fight. And we've had a few. For us, our biggest one was the one we had in Manhattan years ago with the delivery men. They were working for one of the delivery companies and they were charging them to use their car, charging them for their aprons, charging them for all kinds of things. These fellas all wound up with millions of dollars in back pay.
But, you know, some of these folks were doctors and lawyers from West Africa who came here and wound up being delivery men. It was a great victory. That was the biggest one. We've had a lot of small ones with the undocumented immigrant workers. We try to print things in multiple languages or get someone who can speak to them.

Q: Do you find that coalitions are helpful in trying to win the trust of undocumented workers?

JD: Yes. Very, very much, I think that one of the most important things you can do is to get with the community, get with their church, get with the community leaders. We're involved in Brooklyn in a number of different campaigns with the community.

Many times, the union takes the background not the foreground in a drive. We do classes on English as a second language. We've had lawyers come in that specialize in immigration and naturalization and hold seminars about their rights. You know, sometimes, you don't get an organizing victory out of that. But you've made a difference in their lives. You've helped them. Someday, it'll pay off, but, in the meantime, people are a little bit better than they were before they met you, so that's a victory in itself.

A number of our staff speak Spanish, whether it be the field staff or in the office itself. We have one gentleman that works in one of our departments from Nigeria who speaks multiple languages, so if a member calls, he can speak to them. We have people who speak Creole. We look for people who can speak multiple languages so that we can communicate better. And if we find a place where we don't have the language, we'll bring somebody in. We'll find somebody and get them and create a comfort zone so they can communicate freely with us.

John Durso

Q: Organizing was one of the big issues a few years ago when Change to Win broke away from the AFL-CIO. Local 338 seems very committed to organizing and to having a permanent organizing staff. Not all unions have been that way in recent years. Do you see any improvement in recent years in that regard with other unions?

JD: I think more and more people are trying to organize, but the laws in this country are so stacked against you, it is so difficult to organize. But, yeah, I mean, everybody's trying to. That was one of the things with the break between Change to Win and the AFL-CIO. But, quite frankly, the break was in Washington, not here on Long Island and in this region. I mean, the president of my international union is the president of Change to Win. Yet I'm the president of the AFL-CIO here on Long Island, because we have a working agreement, we understand each other's issues and we continue to work together. So, there were those differences down in DC, but, here in our region, in our world, we all work together. There's some good-natured ribbing going on. It was a little bit more when it first started, but everybody works together.

Q: Do you see the two organizations uniting any time soon?

JD: I think, down the road, yes. I think a united labor movement is everybody's wish. There are still some differences out there, but where there aren't differences is in which direction the country should take. And we work together on elections, work together on immigration rights, work together on voting rights. Just take a look at some of the things that are going on with voting rights. You would think this was the '40s and '50s all over again, Jim Crow. You're seeing it throughout the South, you're seeing it up North here. Every single day is a fight for rights.

There is not a day that goes by that you can just say, "Okay, I can take it easy." Every day, you have to fight for the rights, whether to organize or to vote, to do what we all do is a fight every single day. And I think I said it before, it's not for the faint of heart. And it's not for the uncommitted.

Here on Long Island, there are over 100,000 children that go to bed hungry every single night. We have one of the poorest school districts in the entire state here on Long Island. Where we're sitting, we are a mile from one of the richest neighborhoods and we're two miles away from one of the poorest and they butt up against each other and it's almost like a line of demarcation. God forbid you cross that line. Whether it be in the labor movement or in society itself. That's got to stop. Because people need to walk a mile in each other's shoes and see what they're experiencing so that you can understand each other. But there is a lot of poverty on Long Island. There's a lot of working poor. Some of my members work two jobs. Both parents may have to work two jobs. My members have good benefits and have good jobs, but the cost of living is such that everybody has to work.

But some people out of this area view all of us on Long Island as if we're all rich and we have the best schools. We do have some of the best schools, but we also have some of the poorest and they're right next door to each other and nobody gets it.

The middle class was created by the labor movement. It is our mission to speak for those who have no voice. That's our mission. And we have to lead. We have to speak out again injustice. We have to speak out for people's rights and do what needs to be done to protect those rights. We're only here for a short time. Who knows how long I'll be president. But my job is to prepare this union and prepare my membership and to prepare my community for the people who follow me. As it was for the people who came before me. I stand on their shoulders. So if I'm not doing what's right by my members, by my community, by my union, I'm not doing my job. And that's what the labor movement's all about.

Q: In addition to being president of 338, you have also been president of the Long Island Fed these past six years. Can you talk a bit about the changes that have happened or that you would like to see happen in terms of the Long Island Federation of Labor?

JD: Well, this is going to sound like a commercial, but the Long Island Fed has really grown. And we've been in the forefront of a number of issues, like getting the living wage in Suffolk County. We're very involved with different projects that are going on, like the Hub. We're very fortunate that our executive director, Roger Clayman is a pro. He's fabulous at it. We're a small organization, but we're the fourth largest central labor council in the country and that's a testament to the hard work of our staff. We represent dozens upon dozens of different unions. But we all work together for the common good. You know, we have our discussions, but we speak through the Federation and are very unified. And we've never, ever been tighter and worked better together than we have with the building trades. Our relationship with them has been extraordinary, under the leadership of Jim Castellane as the president of the building trades.

We've had great political victories, as well as our share of defeats but we're doing a lot of good work. One of our top priorities is going to be re-electing Tim Bishop in Congressional District 1. Tim's a tremendous supporter of labor. And he's just a brilliant, brilliant guy and we are going to work as one voice, unified, to get him reelected. We can't afford not to have a fella like Tim Bishop in Congress.

We're starting classes for training people who want to run for public office. We also do monthly educational programs for our members. We have speakers come in and talk to them. We promote the education of members through Hofstra [the Hofstra Labor Studies Certificate Program]. That's an important part of everything that we do.

The Fed has a great new website [www.longislandfed.org]. And Vic Fusco runs a couple of different radio programs, some in Spanish, some in English. The Fed and Local 338 are financial supporters of it. And now Chris LaGrange has this radio show, UCOMM, that we financially support. It's an Arbitron- rated show.

You know, those are important steps that we do to spread the word and to bring some cooperation among unions. A steamfitter would have no idea what a nurse practitioner does or, you know, a teacher might not have any idea what a roofer does. So the classes and the meetings present the opportunity for working people of diverse backgrounds to come and to talk and to get to know each other and understand each other's issues – that's what the Fed does. And this is done with a small staff of really dedicated people. And it's made a real difference. So, other federations might have problems or be going off in different directions, but we're a unified group.

Q: How much diversity is there today at the Fed?

JD: Not enough. We work for diversity. But we are an affiliate-driven organization. So, as affiliates promote people of color, women, minorities, then they become more involved in the Federation. We have the people that the different affiliates send us, but we've reached out to different groups in them, so that we have more participation. I have to say, we've made great strides, but it's not enough. You know, we have to look like the people we represent, all of us.

Q: Is there a women's committee?

JD: Actually, I think there's going to be a committee sometime in the early spring. Of course, you know, in the UFCW, we have a woman's network. And a young lady from my office is the regional coordinator for the UFCW in this area. It's something that the Federation is supportive of. We have now Connie Batts from PEF [Public Employees Federation] as one of our vice presidents. She does an amazing job. The secretary of the Fed board is Eileen Sullivan from TWU. Rebecca Mowl is our political director at the Federation. And Amy Ullo is our researcher and Kathy Goodwin is our Office Manager. So we have many women in high-profile and leadership positions. But, you know, if you look at our delegates meeting, the difference between now and six years ago is dramatic. It's like day and night.

Q: Could you say a little bit about the Fed's relationship with Jobs with Justice? Not a lot of people know what Jobs with Justice is exactly.

JD: Well, it's an organization unto itself, but they operate out of our office. We work very closely with them. Roger Clayman is on the board, as is Vic Fusco and Sara Fusco . But it's an organization that does wonderful work. and we promote it very strongly at the Federation, because we have like minds — standing up for workers' rights.

Q: Long Island was just granted $102 million in a state development grant, won by the Long Island Regional Economic Development Council. Among that group, you are the only labor leader. What do you see as the prospects of its state money being leveraged to create more solid-paying jobs for local working people?

JD: Many of the projects that have been approved will provide good jobs during the construction phase. But we as a labor movement must work to make the permanent jobs good-paying union jobs. That's a discussion we'll have to have with a number of the employers.

"If we don't come together, business and labor, as equal partners, for the betterment of our community, we're going to lose a whole generation of people. And all that will be left here are the very poor and the very rich. And that would be an absolute disaster... I think we have a unique opportunity to change this place for the better and make it wonderful. Because we have so many brilliant people and great natural resources, and a really smart workforce."

But I was very, very pleased to be a part of the council. It showed that the governor has a lot of respect for the labor movement. And there were a number of people on the subcommittees from labor. We had about ten different subcommittees and there were a number of labor representatives. But it was a very good experience. I say this to Kevin Law, one of the co-chairs, all the time. I support labor being involved so that business people see that we don't have horns. You know, that we're not gonna come in the middle of the night to steal their children. That we're just like them; we just want a better life for ourselves and the people we represent.

And I think that jobs will be created by this, by the money, by the leveraging. That was one of the criteria: that a small amount of money from the state would be leveraged to create jobs. And the governor made it very clear and Lt. Gov Duffy made it very clear that this is about jobs. So each one of the projects was about what it would do in the community and the jobs it would create.

I think there are great opportunities. You know, when the project in Ronkonkoma gets going, there'll be thousands of jobs there. That project, with MacArthur Airport and that whole area, will do such wonderful things for that community. It'll be good-paying union jobs created, and then opportunities for permanent jobs afterwards.

Wyandanch Rising is another project that this is funding. There'll be thousands of jobs there. The project can break the stranglehold of poverty in that community, because people from within that community will be able to get some of those jobs and be trained in new careers. So that in itself is just fantastic.

And if we ever can get the Hub in Nassau County going. If they can stop the politics of it – the Republicans don't want to support something the Democrats like; Democrats don't want to support something the Republicans like. In the meantime, the community and the people are suffering. You've got over 50 acres of cement with a crumbling building on it and nobody going to work. Because nobody wants to get their act together and do what's right for the community.

Now, there was a proposal that was put forth that the voters of Nassau County voted down. That proposal would have cost the average resident, I think, the price of a cup of coffee and a buttered roll each month. And it would have put thousands of people to work. But the people spoke. It could have been packaged a different way so that people understood it. But, you know, people automatically see a billionaire and "Why are we helping him?" Well, you're not helping him; you're helping the community. You're putting people to work. You're keeping that facility. You're keeping that team, which generates $240 million a year into the Nassau economy. Plus, all of the other ancillary things that come along with it.

You have a facility that is one of the worst for conventions in the country. We need to grow, because now we only get a couple of crumbs from New York City. You have an ice skating rink that can barely keep the ice frozen enough for the players to play upon. What do you want to do? The attitude of some people is: "Why don't you put everybody on the bus and ship 'em out? But we have an opportunity here in Nassau County to put thousands of people to work and create a destination location.

We've got young kids that won't stay here, because they don't have jobs. They have no place to live. They have no reason to stay here, other than their parents holding onto their pants legs and not letting them go. We have to create something. The Hub can do that.

The Wolkoff project can do that, out in Pilgrim State. Those can be great projects. And there's multiple years of work. At Wolkoff's, it could probably be a generation's worth of work. But you've got to do the job right and build it union.

I don't have any question in my mind that the Hub, once they get out of their own way and figure out what to do with it, will be a transformational project. It'll change the face of Nassau County. And the Pilgrim State Project can do the same thing for Suffolk. You take Wyandanch Rising, you take the Ronkonkoma Hub, you take the Wolkoff project and you can turn Suffolk County into a place where people will want to live because you'll have a vibrant economy, you'll have plenty of jobs, and places for the young people to live.

And what does labor want out of it? We want jobs. We want the money to stay in our community. We don't want outside contractors from South or North Carolina coming in, living three and four and five people in a room and sending that money out of this area. The money should stay here. The whole idea of project labor agreements is that you have a better working relationship, so that projects can get done on time and get done in coordination. That's what we want to see happen at the Hub, with Wyandanch Rising, and in

Wolkoff. The PLA is the way to go, so that all the unions work together in an organized method to make the projects finish on time and on or under budget.

Q: And does the governor seem to support the idea of Project Labor Agreements?

JD: I think the governor is supportive of jobs. I think he's supportive of the rules and regulations as they stand. I haven't asked him if he would come out and say, "That's got to be a union job." I wouldn't put him in that kind of position. Do I think, in his heart, that he believes that? Absolutely. And I think the overwhelming majority of politicians do also. It's just there's a few that don't quite understand or see the light. We have to work on that. And some builders don't see that, don't understand that.

Q: Is there any pressure within this development grant to encourage developers to use union labor and create union jobs?

JD: Where Davis-Bacon applies, obviously, they have to do that. But different communities have different local laws. There are projects that are being built that have to have certain qualifications, which lends itself to be built union. That have to have qualified apprenticeship programs. And then there are projects that need government approval. Sometimes hose approvals come with the support of the labor movement and occasionally they do not.

You know, I think it's important for labor to take a stand and talk about what can be done, how it can help a community. And then I think labor also has an obligation to say where it will not help the community. Where projects sound good, but, if the work is not being done properly, I think it's incumbent upon us to say that. You don't want something slipshod, you don't want something done without professionalism. By using a union contractor, you can get the best deal. It's been shown time after time that union work pays for itself in the quality and the efficiencies. But some people are a little slow to getting that. That's one of our many challenges, to try and educate them on it.

Q: Can you say a word about the Hempstead Village Renaissance Project, developed by Don Monti?

JD: I have to tell you, that's one of my favorites. Don Monti is really visionary. They do their work union and that's going to change that community. It's almost like a light switch, what that can do for that community. There's sewers, that need work, the storefronts, the housing, it can change Hempstead. Hempstead used to be wonderful and then it had some really tough days. I've been living on the Island all my life. I remember Hempstead when it was the place and when it was really tough. They're fighting their way back and the community is strong and it's wonderful, but this project is like the tipping point. And, you know, I give Don Monti and his team credit for seeing it and pushing it through. The Village and the town, they're working together. Will he make a profit? Sure, but he realizes that if he's successful there and then he goes on to the next project, well, he has that in his corner. He can say, "Look what I did here." So that goes a long way for the next project.

Q: Is your sense, with all these projects that this whole idea of transit-oriented development (TOD) is now just accepted as the way to go. Does smart growth, clustering new housing and shops around transit stations, does that makes sense to other union leaders when you talk about economic development?

JD: Oh, I think it's vital. I think it's a vital part of our future. It's like the second track that's going to bring service from Ronkonkoma to Hicksville This is basic to the future of the Island. I have four children. I want them to stay on Long Island. I lost one to Jersey. But the other three are still on the Island. I want them to be able to afford homes. I want them to be able to have jobs. I want to see my grandchildren, okay? We have so much to offer in this area. We have a beautiful community, access to the City, the beaches, the parks, but there's no jobs. There's no "cool downtowns"? There's no opportunity for young people to live or to congregate here. You need development centered around transportation hubs, the railroads, the buses – that's a natural. You need to have retail and housing. It's why Brooklyn is the hot spot, right? All the kids kill themselves to go there, because transportation, the apartments, the restaurants, the museums – everything is right there.

Q: A related question: What is the best way to guarantee that some of these jobs are coming from low-income neighborhoods, so that cycle of poverty is broken?

JD: You work with the community. It's a community development project, so that there are jobs set aside for the community itself. It's very common. What we don't want is what happened in Rockville Center. They did this one project in Rockville Center where workers were all coming from South Carolina and Georgia. They built it non-union. There was a demonstration there one day. It was very interesting. They bring them up here and house them in trailers. So the money's not staying on the Island; it's going back. What purpose does it serve to have these projects here and not have the guys put their money to work in your community. They go to the neighborhood deli, the supermarket, the movies. If they're keeping fifty bucks to themselves for the week and shipping the rest of their money back to South Carolina, we're not seeing that in our community. Nothing against South Carolina, but we're trying to build our community here.

Q: Another area of the report that you worked on that got the $102 million from the state was recommending more manufacturing: like meat packing plants, turkey and duck plants. Does Local 338 represent some meatpacking workers or more the retail end?

JD: In the RWDSU, we have thousands of people in meatpacking

and processing down South. We have thousands of members. And the UFCW and various locals represent meat processing – there's a whole division. Out East, they wanted to put in a plant for locally grown, locally supplied products, putting people to work. I actually liked that one a lot. And, people who didn't get money this year can reapply. Maybe they weren't ready or because there were so many good ones, you had to narrow it down. There were so many that were so deserving of consideration. But, you know, $102 million sounds like a lot of money but we can only do one project with that.

Q: I noticed there's a breakdown in the report of where the money's going and some of it's very specific: $50,000 here or $400,000 there. And then there's about $40 million, which is not really specified. It's like "development projects which are deemed worthwhile" or something. So was that a case where the committee was kind of allowing for this in the future? That $40 million, potentially, some of it would go to these projects which aren't shovel-ready right now?

JD: There are projects, like at Brookhaven National Lab, that they're building so that the money will be there as the project comes together. They're almost ready, but they're not quite ready. And these could be just life-changing projects. You know, they're not necessarily big jobs that will employ thousands of people. But, as these move forward, the jobs that come from this development will cause hundreds of other jobs. One leads to the other – things are interconnected. It was fascinating. And very time consuming. I have to give Rabinowitz and Law tremendous credit. They didn't miss anything and they worked like dogs.

Q: On several projects, the state contribution would be small, relative to the money that was being leveraged with these development projects. The state money was going for sewers and infrastructure. Is it possible for developers to build that themselves or are they're really dependent on local governments or state government to build that infrastructure for them? Or is there an issue in terms of getting permits for it and approvals?

JD: Yes. Having the state involvement in it and getting the money from it will help move that along. From the beginning, everything had to be leveraged. If the state put up one dollar, the developer had to at least give you a 5:1 or a 10:1 return. That was one of the requirements and, for the most part, that's how it went.

But, you know, sewers are just such a basic that some of these developers, they want to make sure that the state has some skin in the game. And to their credit, they're putting their fortunes on the line and want to make sure that the state's not going to say, "Oh, never mind, we don't like that." When they go for financing, they have the ability to say, "This is a state-approved project." It's different than if I'm to say, "I want to build XYZ Community and I need your money." That is different than if I'm saying, "I want to build XYZ Community and, by the way, the State of New York has given me $10 million towards it." That gives them much more credibility when they go to their borrowers.

Q: And then that gives labor more bargaining power?

JD: Well, a lot of these projects, in order to get done, need qualified people. You can't go onto Craig's List and say, "I need a carpenter!" You need an expert. These projects are like that; you need to come to the unions to get the qualified people. So you develop a project labor agreement, which puts everybody on an even playing field. Then the project gets done smoother and more efficiently. Project labor agreements are a wonderful piece of equipment to use. What you don't want to happen is, say you've got a delivery of supplies but the guys you need to take them off the truck are not at work because it's a holiday. Or the delivery arrives at 3:30, but my guys get off at 3 o'clock, so now the shipment is just sitting there. Under a project labor agreement, everybody works the same hours and has the same holidays, so issues like this can be avoided. It's just, in my humble opinion, smart business. And it also prevents any labor stoppages. The Hub or the Wolkoff project or Wyandanch Rising –those are big projects. There's bound to be some disagreements from time to time. But it keeps everybody working and the project moving forward while you work out your differences, which you don't have without a project labor agreement.

Q: You mentioned that so many businesspeople or others unfamiliar with unions seem to think that union leaders have horns or they're the enemy. And, certainly, since the 2010 elections, there's been an extraordinary amount of all-out attacks on labor rights in a number of states in the country. We just had Indiana become the first state in over a decade to pass a right-to-work law. And Wisconsin and Indiana and Ohio are all on the attack against collective bargaining rights. Do you see any echoes of that in the New York region? Say, for example, in Nassau County? Do you see some local politicians who are perhaps trying to blame unionized workers for the persistent slow growth and high unemployment, and then they try to change the game through privatization, like with Long Island Bus?

JD: Do I see it? I see it every single day. And you see it in everything that we do. You see it on a national level, you see it on a state level. Every time there's something wrong, it's labor's fault. Well, you know what: people forget that labor is the community. I say, tongue in cheek, about labor not having horns. But I have been at meetings where I'm the only labor person there and people look at you like, "What the hell are you doing here?" Well, what do you mean? What am I doing here? I'm part of the community, I contribute, I have something to say, I pay my taxes just like you.

But, the politicians, they try and put it on the backs of working people. It's the same thing at the county level. The budget situation in Nassau County is disgraceful. It's from years of neglect, but you have a contract that you negotiate with the union. You'd live up to the contract. That's a basic obligation that you have. You don't break the contract. You don't walk away from the middle of it. You live with it, you deal with it.

In the first year of the new county executive, Ed Mangano, I probably had more meetings and or conversations with him than I had in eight years with Suozzi, to try to be helpful. Because I knew things were tough. I was very fond of Ed Mangano, prior to him becoming county exec, when he was a legislator. But I am very frustrated with the attitude that he and his administration took towards the unions. While I didn't have [Local 338] members that were personally affected by this, as the head of the Federation, it was my job to try to work with him and try to help him. But, no matter where we turned, it was labor's fault. And when we brought this to their attention, the administration would say, "You should be getting back and negotiating, instead of complaining." I mean, it was and is a shame.

You're blaming the cops for the financial situation?! Are there some big pay-outs? Yeah, there's the odd payout, but that's not the norm. You know, people look at the one in 500. That's the one they focus in on.

It's like the state pensions. The average CSEA state worker retires on a pension between $18,000 and $20,000 a year. That's not bankrupting the state. That's not causing the economic decline in this state. That's barely keeping them out of living in a Sears box! But they become the subject of ridicule.

Now, are there financial difficulties? Yes. Are there limited budgets? Yes. But you work towards a solution and you don't put people in a corner and you don't attack the people who you need to get you out of the situation.

You know, they just want to slash. And people are being hurt by it. They slashed social services. There was an uproar of all the nonprofits in Nassau County because nobody was getting paid for five or six months. Organizations were taking money out of their pockets to pay their people because they weren't getting the money from Nassau County. That's wrong. It's disgraceful. You can't cut your way to prosperity. You've got to invest. Do you have to make some tough choices? Sure. But not everything is a tough choice. There is an opportunity to work in collaboration and not to threaten. If you put somebody's back up against the wall, they're gonna strike out. They don't want to do that. We had 3000 people on the front lawn of the county executive's office. Oh, it was a great rally. But nobody wanted to be there. They would rather have worked things out together.

Long Island Bus? I spoke to board members from the MTA, they were willing to work with us. Had some conversations with the county executive. Tried to work with them together. Roger and I met with Jay Walder up in Albany. He was willing to listen. We're having conversations and the county executive called for his resignation! The same day he's asking for help from them. Sometimes it doesn't help to do that.

Q: What would have been the alternative? The best alternative to privatizing Long Island Bus?

JD: Long Island Bus started out as a private enterprise and it was a disaster. The county abandoned a privatized system in the 1970s to improve service. The LI bus situation was handled badly from the get-go. I believe that the best solution would have been for the county executive, the leaders of the legislature and the unions involved to sit in a room and hammer out a deal to the benefit of the people of Nassau County.

Q: Do you find it peculiar that the same gigantic company – Veolia – the biggest water company in the world, that's just gotten the contract for Long Island Bus is also trying to be part of the privatization of the sewage treatment systems? They seem to be coming in all of these places where the county is allegedly trying to save money through privatization.

JD: I would venture to say it's not really in our best interest. I am very happy for my good friend, Pat Bowden of the TWU, that she was able to get a contract with Veolia. She worked very hard and her people worked very hard and the attorneys and everybody did the best they can. Veolia promised they're not going to increase the rates. They will keep the same routes. I think it's a one- or two-year commitment? They're a multinational—it means nothing to them. So they wait a year, two years, they make the changes. And the cuts that they talked about are in the very neighborhoods where the people have the greatest need.

I asked some people at a meeting, "How many times do you see people getting out of their Mercedes and getting on to the Long Island Bus?" It's against the odds, it's not happening. It's the areas that are trying to turn around. If we see cuts in routes that bring students, faculty and staff to Nassau Community College, it will cause irreparable harm to the students and our communities. If they can't get to school, they'll drop out. It will affect those neighborhoods and that will perpetuate that poverty, the gang violence and everything else that we are all fighting so hard to eliminate remains because of the bus. It's all connected. Give them an opportunity to get to school. Protect the student. Protect the elderly, protect the veteran, protect the people who are going for dialysis who need the bus for their livelihood.

In the middle of the greatest crisis Nassau County's had, they shouldn't cut off funds then. Do it over a five or six-year period, ease it out. So that people have the opportunity to adjust.

Q: In October, one of the presidential debates is going to be at Hofstra again. If you had the chance to ask the president and whoever his Republican rival is one

question relevant to working people, what kind of question do you think we need answers to?

JD: If I had to ask the president one question about labor, about working people. I would ask him how can he help protect the rights of the working men and women of this country? How can he help working men and women maintain the dignity and respect that they deserve? And how can they enjoy a piece of the American dream and be able to have free association with people that they want to associate with?

And then, if I was asked to have a follow-up question, I would ask him this: How would he ensure us having a level playing field? Because you already know that the American worker can outwork anybody in this world. And we're all in favor of the employer making a profit. But all we want is our fair share of it. I'd love to be able to ask him that question.

Q: And, given what you know about the Republican candidates, what would you ask or say to them?

JD: I'd paraphrase what they said to Joe McCarthy: "Have you no decency? Have you no soul?" You know, Mitt Romney's father, the governor of Michigan? He wasn't the greatest labor guy in the world, but he understood the labor movement. He had respect for the labor movement. How far has his son come? He made his money off the misery of people. He didn't build something, he didn't create something. He made his money off of people's misery. I believe he doesn't care about working people.

Q: Is there anything that you'd like to add?

JD: I think, in the next couple of years, we have an incredible opportunity to change the face of our region. To have our own little version of Silicon Valley, to make an educational Mecca here, with the medical schools, with the colleges.

But, if we don't come together, business and labor, as equal partners, for the betterment of our community, we're going to lose a whole generation of people. A whole generation. And all that will be left here are the very poor and the very rich. And that would be an absolute disaster.

I worry about our community. It's a real concern. But, at the same time, I think we have a unique opportunity to change this place for the better and make it wonderful. Because we have so many brilliant people and great natural resources, and a really smart workforce. But we need to harness that for the good of the people.

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BOOK REVIEW

Making Trouble in the Workplace and the Novel

Troublemakers: Power, Representation, and the Fiction of the Mass Worker, by William Scott. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012.

Reviewed by Russell Harrison

Take This Job and ... The desire to find a job did not seem to be with me.
– Chares Bukowski

William Scott's excellent new book is an examination of U.S. proletarian literature – at first glance reminiscent of books like Walter Rideout's The Radical Novel in the United States: 1900-1954 and, to a lesser degree, Daniel Aaron's Writers on the Left and Barbara Foley's Radical Representations. Like those books, it discusses the socio-historical context of American literature in the first half of the 20th century. But its importance lies in its emphasis on the working-class's "power at the point of production," i.e., in the factory, on the assembly line, in the mill. Moreover, Scott's focus is on the mass industrial worker. It is the CIO/UAW worker, not the AFL worker. As Scott writes:

"Such projects (the work of Janet Zandy and Laura Hapke, for example) treat working-class fiction as mainly a documentary record of different types of work. However, when it comes to narratives about workers who refuse to work – by exercising power on the job in a number of ways that are unrelated, and often in direct opposition, to their productivity as workers – these studies have had relatively little to say. What challenges, then, might such refusals to work pose for the novelist who wants to represent workers? How should one represent workers who are in the act of resisting the category of work itself." (5-6)

Scott interestingly uses "represent" in both its aesthetic and political senses in his book. The failure of political representation, either through the union hierarchy or the formal political structures (Congress, the president, the courts) is paired with the failure of artistic representation. Writing of mass-worker novels by Dalton Trumbo, Jack London, and Upton Sinclair, Scott notes that: "As workers' degradation increases through the means used to increase the speed and efficiency of industrial production, the availability of forms to represent them adequately in a novel or a political party appears to diminish" (57). In an odd metaphorical use of the defense mechanism identified as "the internalization of the aggressor," Scott notes that, for example, Robert Cruden's novel, Conveyor (1935)

"...instead glorifies the mechanized worker while castigating the tyrannical bosses who drive their men like so many galley slaves [. . .] machine technology and the Fordist assembly line function not as the stock villains they are usually taken to be – the inhuman symbols of workers' alienation and oppression, the instruments of their total subjugation under the forces of capitalism – but as the real heroes of the novel, particularly at those moments when workers and machines are shown working together in productive harmony." (82)

I have, to this point, given something of a synopsis of the first part of Scott's book, entitled, "The Making of the Mass Worker." But it is the second part, "Strategy and Structure at the Point of Production," that most intrigues. Scott first offers readings of earlier novels, which he characterizes as either IWW novels, syndicalist in outlook, or '30s CIO novels, i.e., economistic. He then analyses the representation of sit-down strikes and the idea that in that tactic the workers have found the most useful weapon in their possession. In the theretofore unsuspected tactic of shutting down production, workers have gained a powerful tool. This, of course, is because with the introduction of largely de-skilled workers and a technological system wherein every part is connected to another part, a stoppage in any one moment of production shuts down the whole factory. Writing in the context of a discussion of the Firestone tire plant strike of 1936 in Akron, Ohio, Scott summarizes the pithy dialectic at play in the mass-worker factory: "In short, the degree of workplace bargaining power that workers possess seems, at least in this case, to be directly related to the degree of degradation – monotony, mechanization, deskilling, and alienation – they must endure on the job" (189). The sit-down strike proved to be a valuable weapon in the 1930s and 1940s. But in another historical twist, it to some degree fostered its own demise. Many such strikes had, as their goal, the formation of a union to represent the workers. But this proved a two-edged sword because: