Labor History

Unions and Party Politics on Long Island

by Lillian Dudkiewicz-Clayman

Through the years, union members on Long Island would register labor Republicans that dominated the Party in the rest of the state and pro-labor legislation for the private sector unions. Labor didn’t always get what it wanted and neither did the Republican Party when the public sector unions diverged. Why is the Nassau County Republican Party now turning on the very organizations that, decade after decade and election after election, consistently provided the contributions and the workers that helped them get elected? As the battle lines are drawn, what will the unions do now that the party apparatus has been eliminated in the process.

All across the country from Wisconsin to Indiana to Ohio to New Jersey, where Republicans gained control of the legislatures, a similar game plan has unfolded. Their goal was to eliminate collective bargaining from the public sector and weaken public sector unions in the process. It is an agenda to privatize as many public services as possible and turn them over to corporate interests, with little regard for the jobs or the services that are eliminated in the process.

On Long Island these events – an outright attack on collective bargaining and the privatization of the bus and health care providers in Nassau County – represent a sea change in the relationship between the Republican Party and the public sector unions.

There has been a special relationship between the Republican Party and the Labor Movement on Long Island for decades, especially in Nassau County. Labor has supplied the votes and an army of campaign workers. Republicans made sure that government provided good paying jobs based on good contracts for the public sector and pro-labor legislation for the private sector unions. Labor didn’t always get what it wanted and neither did the Republican party. But there has been an ‘understanding’ that on Long Island, Republicans were different. They were not the anti-labor Republicans that dominated the Party in the rest of the country. They were even different from their upstate brethren.

Through the years, union members on Long Island would register as Republicans because the Republican Party protected their interests. Locally, Union leaders frequently served as Republican candidates. As long as the Party supported the unions, unions could support the party.

Many of the current union leaders and activists on Long Island were born and raised in working class families that moved to Long Island from one of New York City’s five boroughs. Most have stayed true to their working class roots. As they and their families moved to the Island, they regularly enrolled as Republicans. Their unions, with only a few exceptions, supported Republican candidates. This occurred despite the fact that over the years since WWII, the national Republican Party was the party that took responsibility for the Taft-Hartley Act, the Landrum-Griffin Act, and railed against what they perceived as the social excesses and the pro-worker Labor Laws of the New Deal. Former city residents and their children lived with the Tammany Democratic machine and voted Democratic in the city. But once they moved to the Island, they and their children realized that the Republican machine was the means to assure a job or access to government services.

This marriage of Republican politics and union support helped elect local mayors, town supervisors and county executives. During the 1970’s and 1980’s, with labor support, “Long Island Republican leaders could boast that their two counties cast more Republican votes than any other two in the nation.” For example, up until the past several years, Congressman Peter King’s “union support had been at the heart of the Nassau G.O.P.’s success, and King prided himself on his kinship with working-class voters.”

How did this relationship between machine politics and labor unions diverge? Why is the Nassau County Republican Party now turning on the very organizations that, decade after decade and election after election, consistently provided the contributions and the workers that helped them get elected? As the battle lines are drawn, what will the unions do now that the party apparatus has betrayed them? Who can the public sector unions trust and who can they support?

How did unions get to this point and how do they regain their political power? I recently asked a number of labor leaders and activists on Long Island for their views on this question. I prefaced that question with another: how did they and their families arrive here on Long Island and become engaged in the Labor Movement?

First, some background. It begins in New York City. The City has long been the bastion of Democratic machine politics. During the latter part of the 19th century, Democratic politicians discovered that they could ascend to power on the wave of votes from the immigrant workers that flooded New York. Recognizing the potential of sheer numbers, the Democratic machine of Tammany Hall used the power of patronage to establish New York City as a stronghold for the Democratic Party by exchanging jobs, contracts and positions for votes.

The city Democratic machine has been long-lasting. Even today, despite the election of Republicans LaGuardia, Lindsay, Giuliani and Bloomberg as mayors, the Democratic Party is still dominant in New York City. In 2012, in most of the New York City council districts, and in most of the city’s state assembly and state senate districts, the primary election for the Democratic nomination is viewed by many as the “real” election.

On Long Island, this is not the case. Historically, the Republican Party has been dominant here. Many of the people moving onto the island came from one of the five boroughs. Ask almost anyone who lives on Long Island where their family came from and you will most likely hear the Brooklyn, Bronx, Queens and on occasion, Manhattan. The president of the Nassau PBA James Carver told me, “Everyone joined the Republicans when they moved here.”

Many of today’s labor leaders and activists came to Long Island as children. They arrived during the 40’s, 50’s and 60’s. Families moved to Long Island for the possibility of a single family home, good schools, less crime and a chance to get away from the crowded city. Many were part of a vast migration in the years following WWII.

In the 1940’s, a severe housing shortage existed in New York City, caused in part by the rationing of entire neighborhoods for highways like the Cross Bronx Expressway. The shortage provided an impetus for veterans to look for housing in places other than the City. The passage of the GI Bill after WWII provided returning soldiers with interest mortgages for homes. So, beginning in the 1940’s, when William Levitt developed a method of building inexpensive tract houses by building on slabs, massive housing development projects like Levittown sprang up like weeds in a vacant lot all over Long Island, especially in Nassau County. In a very short time, Long Island became an attractive alternative to crowded city living.

The roads and highways built prior to WWII also contributed to the population explosion on Long Island. During the 1930’s, state park commissioner Robert Moses built the parkways and roads to reach the state parks he created on Long Island. The Northern State and Southern State Parkways provided access to much of Long Island where previously there were few roads. Good roads and affordable automobiles established an easy commute for former city residents who still held jobs in the city. For an increasing number of new Long Islanders, the wartime expansion of manufacturers such as Fairchild Republic, Grumman, and Sperry Gyroscope provided jobs nearby.

By the 1950’s, the population growth on Long Island was nothing short of spectacular. “In the time span between censuses, Nassau’s population grew 93.3%, from 672,765 to 1,300,171. Suffolk grew from just 276,129 persons to 666,784, a whopping 141.5% increase. The Island’s population count soared higher by over one million people. Housing units constructed in Nassau and Suffolk counties in the decade accounted for 30% of all the homes built in New York State. The following years (1960-1970) were the next highest decades of population growth. During this period the Nassau-Suffolk area grew by 589,000 persons, a 29.9% increase.”

Many of the people who moved to Long Island came from the city’s many ethnic neighborhoods. One of the largest ethnic groups to move to Long Island from the five boroughs were Italian-Americans. In the early years of the twentieth century, they arrived in numbers and were often met with outright bigotry and hostility by native Long Islanders. The Klu Klux Klan was active in Suffolk County and staged rallies against the “foreigners”. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants were suspicious of Italian American Catholics, fearing that their loyalty to the Pope override their allegiance to the United States. Most of these early Italian migrants were workers, spending most of their days putting food on the table with no time for partisan political activity.

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(photo: Regional Labor Review)
In Nassau County, new hires were generally temporary because we are related."

The Republicans, by collecting the one percent from people who got their jobs through the patronage system, reinforced the idea that what the machine gave, the machine could take away. Most people understood that politicians have long memories, that loyalty counted for something. Even those who were not employed with the patronage system, when they wanted something from the town or county, they had to go to their election district committee commissioner. As one committeeman said, "People come to me when they want a summer job for their kids, a pothole fixed in the streets, all kinds of things." During the administration of Eugene Nickerson, when the Republicans controlled the Nassau County government in the 1960's, they, too, solicited contributions from employees. They went beyond the Republicans; the Democrats asked for three percent of employees' annual salary. But the democrats weren't very successful at collecting. They raised money by selling tickets to Republican party journals to businesses that wanted government contracts - $800,000.00 in 1970 when a Democratic county executive was still in office. The downside to this system was that if they weren't in office, it was more difficult to sell ads. The unpredictability of elections made businesses more reluctant to contribute to the Democrats.

Without collective bargaining rights public employees had to go along with the patronage system. They had no alternative. During the 1950's and 1960's, the Civil Service Employees Association was more like a "fraternal organization." When CSEA leaders wanted to do anything for members, they "had to curry favor with elected officials, to lobby for salary increases and to go with hat in hand to complain about grievances." Irving Flauemberg, the CSEA leader on Long Island since 1950, held "secret meetings in the basements of bars and grills because if the county knew where we were meeting, they would have a man taking down the names of people who attended." In the face of the Republican machine, the unions tried to organize. Flauemberg, the Republican leader in Nassau, said that anywhere from "50 to 75 percent of the employees' annual salary. But the democrats weren’t very successful at collecting. They raised money by selling tickets to Republican party journals to businesses that wanted government contracts – $800,000.00 in 1970 when a Democratic county executive was still in office. The downside to this system was that if they weren’t in office, it was more difficult to sell ads. The unpredictability of elections made businesses more reluctant to contribute to the Democrats.

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In 1967, the passage of the Taylor Law created collective bargaining rights for public employees. At first, neither the workers nor the Republican Party recognized that the law would change their alliance. Flauemberg and the Republicans had a long political marriage even if CSEA didn’t have the same rights as unions in the private sector.

Why should things change? Relying on the new law, CSEA moved for recognition without calling for elections, often with the support of the elected officials. CSEA became the recognized bargaining agent without an election in 99% of the units in Nassau and Suffolk County. They had 111 units in Nassau and 50 in Suffolk.

The Taylor Law provided an opportunity for other unions to challenge CSEA for representation rights. Teamsters Local 237, the Service Employees International Union and others contested CSEA’s apparent unilateral right to represent the public sector on Long Island and demanded to be included in representation elections. Some unions opposing CSEA were quick to point out the cozy relationship between the Republican Party and CSEA. It was typified as anti-democratic and wrong.

During one challenge in 1974, Hempstead town sanitation workers picketed in opposition to CSEA claiming that the union was “an extension of the Republican Party.” The local union representative on the negotiating committee was also a Republican committeeman from East Meadow. The workers claimed that to get a promotion they had to contribute a certain amount of money to the Republican Party. Illustrating the political culture, the local CSEA president

However, even in those early years, astute Republican leaders recognized the potential for their new neighbors. Despite the fact that the ethnic neighborhoods in the city were overwhelmingly Democratic, Long Island Republican leaders like Wilbur G. Doughty made a point of recruiting Italian Americans into the Republican Party. Mimicking the Democratic Tammany machine in the city, Doughty appointed Italian Americans to paid positions within the party. Recognizing that ethnic politics are based on personal relationships, this patronage paid off in years to come by establishing the groundwork for Republican Party organization among Italian Americans.

Republican Party influence among Italian Americans became more important in the post war years as Italian Americans grew to be the largest ethnic group on the island.11 While many of the former city dwellers may have been democrats or voted Democratic in local elections, they quickly adopted the practice of using family influence to hire relatives for government jobs. Then Mayor-Supervisor Andrew DiPaola, his father was made a director of commercial accounts all had relatives working for Glen Cove. On the county level, the director of the Nassau County Civil Service Commission, Adele Leonard, was hired by a Democratic county executive at the same time that her husband served as chief deputy county attorney. When asked if there was anything wrong with relatives in public jobs, she opined that “there was nothing wrong with several members of a political family holding public jobs. ‘I happen to come from a brilliant family,’ she said. ‘It would be a disservice to the people of Nassau County to deprive them of one of us just because we are related.'”

Nepotism crossed party lines. Glen Cove, the only municipality under Democratic control when the study was done in 1972, also adopted the practice of using family influence to hire relatives for government jobs. Then Mayor-Supervisor Andrew DiPaola, his chief aide Vincent Suozzi and the Democratic Commissioner of Accounts all had relatives working for Glen Cove. On the county level, the director of the Nassau County Civil Service Commission, Adele Leonard, was hired by a Democratic county executive at the same time that her husband served as chief deputy county attorney. When asked if there was anything wrong with relatives in public jobs, she opined that “there was nothing wrong with several members of a political family holding public jobs. ‘I happen to come from a brilliant family,’ she said. ‘It would be a disservice to the people of Nassau County to deprive them of one of us just because we are related.'”

A Newsweek study done in 1972 revealed that many of the Republican political leaders of Nassau County and the towns used their influence to hire family members and relatives. Some of the family members had the required job qualifications while others “got their posts because of family connections and lacked the background that other applicants for the job would have needed.”

So, when former Senator Alphonse D’Amato was the Hempstead Town Supervisor, his father was made a director of commercial research and evaluation. His sister got a job as a Hempstead Town senior citizens counselor.

Part of the formula for the success of the GOP machine was that many Republican committeemen were the heads of political organizations. According to Margiotta, this rule was seen “as an acceptable contribution from public employees.”

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In 1977, labor could claim a new-found power. Expectations rose. County and Town leaders now had to be held accountable for how they responded to workers’ demands. This position turned out to be ’highly unusual for him.’ Newsday noted that his aggressive approach was ‘strange’ to the CSEA, Party boss Joe Margiotta had seen enough.

Over the years, Flauumenbaum successfully won increased wages and benefits for his members. And in 1977, despite initial resistance, the union merged with the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees giving it a powerful voice in Albany and the ability to draw on the resources of the newly formed Public Employees Department of the AFL-CIO. By 1980, CSEA membership in the Long Island region reached 60,000 members. After Flauumenbaum died in 1980, Daniel Donahue became the new president of the Long Island region.

CSEA, no longer the ‘make-believe union’ of the 1950’s, became a force to be reckoned with. As Daniel Donahue declared in 1980 ‘We are not Democrats or Republicans. The Police Department is saying we would like you (a politician) to do something for us. We are saying that we are not going to stand by and watch while our jobs, wages, and benefits are being reduced."

The shift in power became increasingly clear. Nassau County Republicans adjusted to the power of the labor unions. During the 1980’s, the national Republican Party became more conservative, the Nassau Republicans did not. Even after President Ronald Reagan fired striking members of the national Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization in 1981, Nassau County Executive Francis Purcell said that “Although President Reagan has headed us in a new direction,” he hoped that the President would not “go too far- we don’t want to go overboard.”

While the national party was calling for smaller government at all levels, Purcell proposed an increase in services for the residents of Nassau County including ‘drug treatment, daycare, handicapped classes and other welfare programs’. He even suggested ‘free shuttle buses in downtown Nassau.”

Purcell’s successor, Thomas Gulotta, took office in 1987. Gulotta found it ‘difficult to cut off the contracts, the patronage jobs and other perquisites that bound individuals to the machine.” In 1991, he recommended a large tax increase to cover increasing expenditures and came very close to losing the election. Needing the support of public sector unions and unwilling to face the ire of residents by raising taxes, Gulotta’s solution to his political dilemma was deficit spending. By the year 2000 Gulotta’s last year in office, county debt was a staggering $2.9 billion. By the time the 2001 elections came around, even the most loyal Republicans were ready for a change.

Tom Suozzi, a Democrat, was elected in 2001 after winning a primary election against the Democratic Party endorsed candidate, New York State Assemblyman Tom DiNapoli. He was able to establish and maintain good relations with Nassau County unions through two terms in office. In 2009, however, the Republican machine was determined to deliver its own version of the Nassau County finances. Once again the Republicans regained the County Executive’s seat by narrowly electing Edward Mangano as County Executive, denying Suozzi a third term in the process.

Edward Mangano has a decidedly different approach to county workers. Since taking office, he has proposed layoffs, furloughs and cuts to budgets, some so deep that they have left public employees reeling. His direct attack on collective bargaining rights has frayed the alliance that emerged during the 1950’s. The loyalty of county workers, who were raised as Republicans Long Island style, is being sorely tested. At one public meeting on the budget, Jerry Lariciotta, president of CSEA Nassau County Local 830, accused the Republicans of taking up the national party’s assault on public workers: “I’m a Republican – a committeemember for 16 years. The Republicans I met twenty years ago are not the same. These Republicans have decided to take the national agenda and attack the ... workforce day after day.” Mangano’s move threatened the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Association which had “been major financial contributors to Republicans for years.” In 2012, their Political Action Committee gave “more than 500,000 to Nassau Democrats – and nothing to Republicans.”

The Nassau County Republican machine was once the envy of politicians across the country. When President Richard Nixon came to Nassau County for a Republican campaign rally in 1972, his first words to the crowd of 15,000 were, “This is the biggest and best rally ... I have ever seen.” The Republican Party was able to build an army of Party workers because they hired their neighbors, family and friends. It didn’t matter that unions had achieved legal status and had to be bargained with; the party’s elected leaders were bargaining with people with whom they had personal relationships. The party were the workers and the workers were the party. That has changed. The Republican Party is now turning on the very organizations that decade after decade and election after election in negated the contributions and the workers that got them elected. As the battle lines are drawn, the crucial question for the Party is whether that strategy has come at too high a cost.

The rhetoric has become heated in Nassau County. Elected officials are echoing anti-unions slogans heard in places like Wisconsin or Texas. Unions are being blamed for the budget deficits that arose from policies put in place over several decades and then became exacerbated by the financial maldovery in 2008. Nassau County unions must ask themselves who they can trust and support now that the party apparatus they backed for so long has betrayed them.

There are some Nassau Republicans and union leaders who believe that the rise of the Republican Party is temporary – a result of a bad economy. As soon as the economy improves, they believe, things will go back to normal. We shall see.
Why Inequality Harms Democracy

Although income inequality is often considered to be the purview of the market place, it does impact the political universe, with clear implications for democracy. Unequal distribution in wealth and income might mean unequal political access. In situations of extreme inequality of resources, individuals might find that they really do not enjoy the same standing. Inequality is not only a matter of standing with implications for outcomes, rather it affects one’s ability to participate. Democracy does not require that all participate, but it does require that there be no barriers to participation. According to Robert Putnam, democracy requires the development of social capital, which only comes about through the active participation in the myriad of activities and organizations that comprise civil society.1 And yet, income inequality might just be a barrier to even this level of participation. It is perhaps a bedrock principle that all individuals as citizens enjoy the same consideration of their preferences and interests. All citizens have the same access to governing institutions, and at the most nominal level, this finds expressions in “one person one vote,” equality before the law, and equal rights when it comes to speech, press, and assembly. Still, one must surely affect the other. Voter turnout, for instance, is much higher among the wealthy than among the poor. This fact alone has been the basis for the SES model of participation — that those with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to be engaged, especially when it comes to voting — than those with lower socioeconomic status. The SES model does not only encompass levels of income, but education as well.2

Unequal distribution of wealth and income, however, is believed to affect access and may adversely affect individuals’ ability to participate in the democratic process on the same footing. Those lacking wealth and income do not always enjoy the same access to political power as do wealthy, high-income households. In the United States, where politics and money are tightly intertwined, those with lower incomes tend to experience less responsiveness by representatives in Congress. Two extremes in the distribution of income, with great concentrations at both the top and the bottom, can effectively distort opportunity. The ability of those at the top to attain their policy and other ideological preferences is greater.3 Larry Bartels has observed that members of Congress tend to be more responsive to those who are affluent than those in the lower and middle classes, which is essentially the question of access. Analyzing voting patterns on the minimum wage increase that took effect in 2007, he found that senators attached no weight at all to the views of constituents in the bottom of the income distribution. And the views of those in the middle class appeared to only have been slightly more influential. Senators, however, were more responsive to the opinions of affluent constituents than middle class constituents. Republican senators were about twice as responsive as Democrats to the views of higher income constituents, but both Democrats and Republicans were about equally responsive to the views of middle class constituents. There was no evidence of any responsiveness to the views of constituents in the bottom third of the distribution. While senators were consistently responsive to the views of affluent constituents, they were entirely unresponsive to the views of low-income constituents.

All of this would appear to suggest that a more equitable distribution might conceivably result in more responsiveness because members of Congress would no longer have incentives to favor the affluent over the less affluent.4 But it also begs another question: were the senators who were unresponsive to those at the bottom of the distribution less responsive because they had low incomes, or because they themselves were less likely to participate in the political process in whatever form? This is by no means a trivial question because, if the latter, it would imply that if lower inequality would lead to greater participation, especially among those at the lower rungs of the distribution, political figures might be more inclined to be responsive.

The Impacts of Recession on Civic Participation in the New York City Metro Area

by Oren M. Levin-Waldman

Recently in these pages I discussed the impact of income inequality on civic participation in the New York City metro area in 2008. It was clear from my statistical findings that those in households with incomes of less than $30,000 a year were considerably less likely to be civically engaged than those in households with more, and that this was a nationwide problem. But this pattern has been even more pronounced in the New York City metro area where income inequality has been higher. In this paper, I seek to take the findings of the earlier study a step further. I show that between 2008 and 2010, when the country was plunged deep into recession, participation in civic affairs decreased. And yet civic participation was worse in the New York metro area, especially among those in low-income households than it was in both New York State and the U.S. as a whole. During the same period, income inequality increased more in the New York metro area. On one level, this might not be considered problematic in a large metropolitan region where the hustle and bustle of daily living leaves little spare time. But on another level, given New York’s diversity, one might expect to see dynamic pluralism. None of this is to suggest it is not happening; only that it is not for the least advantaged.