

## *Long Island Labor: Constraints, Opportunities, and New Strategies*

by Marc Silver

The past three decades have been trying times for working people. Falling or stagnant wages, fewer benefits and protections, fears of recession, downsizing and job loss have all been parts of the picture. During much of that period organized labor saw the unionized proportion of the work force shrink, even in those sectors where the raw numbers showed an objective increase in membership. The increasing globalization of the economy, reflected in NAFTA and GATT, have created additional pressures on those seeking to protect and advance the interests of workers.

On the other hand, things have started to look up in recent years on the national level. Changes in the leadership of the AFL-CIO and some of its major member unions have brought a renewed sense of activism and vision. A commitment of resources to organizing, seeking to bring union representation to workers not protected by collective bargaining agreements, is a refreshing change after decades of relative quiescence. The Teamsters' successful strike against United Parcel Service was a similarly welcome alternative to a long string of bitter defeats.

### **Recent Shifts for Long Island Labor**

In many respects, the dynamics on the local scene have tended to mirror national trends. The collapse of the defense industry giants, Grumman and Republic, left a gaping hole in the regional economy. The shift in employment toward retail and service sectors could not make up for the loss of tens of thousands of jobs for skilled workers in manufacturing. As an appropriate illustration, consider that the vast physical plant that once housed the Republic Corporation in Farmingdale has been cleared to make way for multiplex movie theatres, a sports entertainment complex and retail outlets. Ticket takers, ushers, sales clerks and game room attendants replace engineers, machinists, welders, and electricians.

Such developments notwithstanding, there are subtle signs of vitality, as well. Public sector unions are beginning to raise their voices in opposition to privatization. As Nassau County seeks to divest itself of its medical care facilities, the word is getting out that streamlining and cost-cutting cannot come at the price of professional and staff employees' ability to provide quality care to patients. New leadership in the building trades unions have allowed for dialogue with community and social activists outside the construction industry on issues much broader than the traditional wages, hours and working conditions (note the excellent topical agenda of the Labor-Religion Coalition over the past several years). In addition, there are signs of a developing cross-industry and cross-union cooperation that hold the potential for injecting vibrancy to Long Island's union labor movement. In the unorganized and nontraditional sectors of the region's labor market, organizations like the Workplace Project are working to promote the interests of immigrant workers in a variety of innovative ways. The Workplace Project has been an effective advocate for Latino workers in the local underground economy, including those in the landscaping, and restaurant sectors. It also has sought to develop alternatives to traditional arrangements by establishing worker cooperatives in the service areas.

Where will these developments take us in the years ahead? Will the strong economic activity of late provide a foundation for economic gains for working people? Can recent trends toward greater reliance on part-time employment and continued erosion of medical, retirement, and family benefits be reversed? Is it at all possible for alternatives to standard exploitative labor market practices, like worker cooperatives, to be nourished and encouraged to grow? The answers to these questions remain far from clear at the present time. Isolated events that offer a glimmer of hope can, if they are not built upon and linked to other similarly positive efforts, turn out to be illusory in the long run. It will require a committed and conscious strategy to strengthen the ties within the organized segment of Labor. It will require a campaign to reach out to the unorganized segments of the work force in both traditional and innovative ways. It will also require the forging of new linkages to community, environmental, and social justice groups and organizations around commonly recognized priorities and goals.

A recent case in point is the King Kullen strike and developments subsequent to its resolution. Teamsters Local 282 was able to minimize the damage done by King Kullen to its former employees when it closed down its Long Island warehouse operation that supplied its supermarket chain in favor of a subcontracting arrangement with a Connecticut firm. It was a heroic effort on the part of

the Teamsters that went far beyond the traditional picket line and negotiation process. First and foremost was the ability to reach out to and work with representatives of organizations outside the traditional sphere of unionized labor. The resulting Coalition to Save Long Island Jobs was an effective vehicle for communicating the message to the broader community on behalf of King Kullen's employees. It also worked to supply community volunteers to help staff the leafleting, picketing and petitioning operations at numerous King Kullen outlets that kept the issue in the public's eye while having a significant impact on King Kullen's operations. The Coalition was able to support the union's food distribution campaign for its striking workers, and raised about \$5,000 to support the strikers who were fighting the loss of their jobs. Partly as an outgrowth of the Coalition's efforts, there have been recent signs of even greater mutual support and cooperation among several Long Island local unions. While such gestures of inter-union support are not unique, they occur far less frequently than necessary if they are to become an effective vehicle for change.

### **The Institutional Context for Labor on Long Island**

The above events can be seen as occurring in an institutional context that presents both constraints and opportunities for labor. Arrangements in several institutional areas are key to understanding the potential for revitalizing labor on Long Island. Within the limitations of this brief treatment, we can refer to four such sets of arrangements particularly relevant for labor today: economics, politics, news media, and community relations. Each presents a complex intersection of obstacles and opportunities for protecting the interests of workers. While these areas are very much connected to one another, it will be useful to look at each individually.

**The Economic Sphere:** The core institution for labor, of course, is the economy. Labor market conditions frequently dictate the viability of aggressive approaches to collective bargaining and organizing activities. The presently low unemployment rates may present the sort of opportunities that have not been available in several years. On the other hand, occupational shifts from manufacturing to the retail and service sectors have meant a movement away from those areas that have been the traditional base of union organizing success. Similarly, the growth in part-time employment, as well as the use of subcontracting and outsourcing on the part of large employers have tended to undercut both the quality of conditions for individual workers and the ability to organize them.

Another aspect of the Long Island economy that affects labor is that the region's maturation during the post-WWII decades, coupled with the decreasing availability of open land for development, have placed a greater emphasis on the need for planning from the standpoint of a proactive perspective. The growth of public/private linkages in the form of industrial incubators, and the role of governmental agencies in attempting to preserve open space on the one hand, while guiding land use for economic activity on the other, are signs of this trend. The increasingly prevalent use of such terms as "sustainable economy" and "sustainable economic development" similarly reflects the growing general awareness of the need for adopting a longer run perspective in managing economic dynamics. In such a climate, for labor to maintain a reactive or passive role risks a continued pattern of dependency or even irrelevancy to the decision processes that ultimately will determine the fate of working people in the region.

Finally, along with Long Island's population generally, the local labor pool is becoming increasingly diverse. The region's work force is more multiform with respect to race, ethnicity, and gender than at any other time. As a result, the interests and concerns of Long Island workers will increasingly take new directions and tend to be expressed in new ways. It will be necessary to be sensitive to these culturally rooted shifts in order to respond effectively to workers' needs.

**The political sphere:** The political scene on Long Island presents particularly difficult challenges for labor. First, the public sector has an impact on labor as a direct employer at the various levels from school districts up through the federal government. It also provides indirect employment opportunities through governmental contracts with private sector organizations. Second, state and federal laws, as well as the operation of the judicial system, establish the climate in which labor organizations must operate to promote the interests of workers. Third, elected officials can communicate to the general public a vision and agenda that may or may not be in the best interests of working people.

How then to manifest an effective political presence? The answer to that question is complicated by several factors. First, the electoral structure of a presumably two-party system with winner-take-all elections places a premium on supporting the side that prevails at the ballot box. Labor support for the losing side can translate into a two or four year term during which it has little chance of being heard. That, in turn, tends to foster a cautious, or even defensive, political strategy. Second, the veritable one-party Republican machine domination in Nassau County and the Republican majority in Suffolk County leave little room for labor to develop a significant power base within either Democratic or Republican parties. Third, there are at present no significant county- or Island-wide third party alternatives with whom organized labor and individual workers can ally themselves.

On the other hand, there are a few indications of activity that have the potential for eventually opening up the political landscape. The establishment of a legislature in Nassau County is a positive development, even though the early indications are that it

has left the Republican Party in its monopolistic political position. Electoral races at the legislative district level may in the long run present opportunities for greater diversity of perspective in Nassau County government, as it has in Suffolk. That change may, in fact, encourage the development of an independent third party presence. In this regard, the attempts by the New Party to engage the electoral process in Nassau at the local and county levels may be a sign of things to come. Lastly, movement in the area of campaign reform at the national and state levels may eventually help to level the political playing field by limiting the extent to which "big money" dominates the game.

**The news media:** It goes without saying that the print and electronic news outlets have tremendous impact on shaping the public's consciousness. Through commentary and reportage, they signify the important issues by what they do and do not inform the public about. Thus the relative visibility of labor and the economic and social issues of concern to working people in the news media is an important factor affecting the opportunities to promote workers' interests.

It is unfortunate, therefore, that labor's visibility tends to be so low. For example, Long Island's principal newspaper, Newsday, has no separate labor section to complement its business section (the latter even includes a separate pull-out "Business Report" with each Monday edition). It reports on the events of business, both large and small, from small-business successes and executive hires and promotions to corporate contracts, profits, takeovers and mergers. Labor finds its way into the paper generally only when reporters cover a disruptive strike by a labor union or alleged criminal activity by one or another union official. The practices of the electronic media mirror that of print journalism. Evening newscasts routinely report on business developments and the daily stock market figures. Little if anything is featured on a regular basis that is directly relevant to labor and employees.

The under-reporting of events in the labor sphere ensures that labor issues remain far back in the public's mind. Coverage that tends to focus on the more socially disruptive and negative aspects of organized labor further distances the public in its thought and sentiment. Much that organized labor does in the public interest goes unrecorded and unrecognized. Many of the key issues that should concern most people who work, whether on salary or for hourly wages, are ignored and overlooked. Better representation in print and electronic news media are going to be required in order to bring about a more favorable labor climate.

**Community and public interest organizations:** There are numerous organizations and associations on Long Island that attempt to deal with one or more pressing issues facing people in the region. All too often such organizations do their work in relative isolation from one another; often unaware of the presence of others with quite similar concerns and goals. As a result, the same ground frequently gets trod by different feet, and activists needlessly seek to re-invent the wheel. At other times, such organizations, unfortunately, come to view one another as competitors for the allegiance of members and volunteers. What is missed in this is the quite real possibility that they can actually facilitate one another's work.

The Long Island Labor-Religion Coalition has long noted that there is much that labor organizations and religious organizations have in common. At their hearts both types of organizations have as their mission to improve the circumstances and help people to meet their own human needs. Once that mutual orientation was acknowledged, it was possible to establish links in those areas where the two types of organizations could cooperate for the benefit of Long Islanders generally. That type of approach need not be an isolated phenomenon.

In fact, if there is a single lesson to be taken from the King Kullen strike, it is the benefit to be gleaned from reaching out to and working with community based organizations whose agendas may not necessarily be focused on labor issues per se. The workers represented by Local 282 were able to prevail because of the support their cause generated in the general public. And the best vehicle for getting the word out to the community was a network of community, civic, and religious organizations.

Of course, such dynamics require reciprocation and accommodation. In other words, there needs to be sensitivity on the part of labor to the aspirations and goals of organizations attempting to address injustices in the areas of race and gender relations, housing, social welfare, environmental protection, and land conservation. Conflicts of interest within such networks are inevitable. However, the difficulties associated with being allied with other organizations whose orientations at times run at cross purposes are outweighed by the opportunities created by working cooperatively where possible on those issues of common interest and toward the public's general welfare.

### **Toward a Long Island Labor Strategy**

Meeting the present and future challenges confronting organized labor and working people on Long Island, requires a perspective on how labor fits into the broader economic, political and social landscape. We are long past the days when reactive responses to business and government initiatives within narrowly defined occupational and industrial jurisdictions are sufficient. Rather, it will be necessary to set an agenda that is proactive, inclusive, and expansive.

In the foregoing analysis, I have pointed to some of the opportunities and constraints presented by labor's institutional context. In so doing, I have also offered some implicit suggestions about the ingredients for a viable labor strategy. As a way of opening a discussion on what would be a viable labor strategy for Long Island, I would like to offer a brief listing of ideas that should be considered in developing a labor strategy:

- **Protect the Organized:** Continued defense of the interests of unionized workers must be at the heart of a labor strategy. This both enhances the position of those within the ranks of organized labor, but also demonstrates to the unorganized the clear benefits to be gleaned from unionization.
- **Organize the Unorganized:** Organized labor must bring within its ranks those not presently benefiting from the protections of collective bargaining. A larger union movement is a stronger union movement. Failure to move aggressively in this area will probably lead to a continuation in decrease in the rate of unionization and the further erosion of labor's influence.
- **Promote Inter-Union Cooperation:** Most local unions do not have the strength to engage in aggressive defense of their membership in isolation. The success of strike-related activities and alternatives such as corporate campaigns and appeals for consumer boycotts depend on the participation of those outside any given local or international union. Labor needs to foster an atmosphere in which workers' first reflex is to support their fellow workers.
- **Support Nontraditional Labor Organizations:** Not all organizations that promote the interests of workers do so through standard collective bargaining approaches. Nonetheless, they require and deserve the support of the more traditional trade and industrial unions. They can be effective allies in the struggle for a fair and just economic order. Similarly, alternative approaches to the organization of work (like worker cooperatives) should be encouraged.
- **Establish an Informational Clearinghouse and Exchange:** In order to facilitate greater labor cooperation an information clearinghouse can serve as an effective vehicle for keeping labor activists informed about recent developments. Rallies and events for which support is needed can be publicized.
- **Develop a Media Campaign:** Labor needs to be more visible with respect to its positive attributes. Efforts should be made to encourage full reportage and analysis of local labor events and issues by area print and electronic outlets. The opportunities for an independent labor newsletter should be explored in order to offer an alternative to the under-reporting and other biases of local media coverage. The approach should be an honest and affirmative outreach to the general public that will increase visibility and general support for work-related issues.
- **Develop an Independent Political Base:** The traditional strategy of rewarding friends and punishing enemies within the two major parties has tended to leave labor in a dependent and weaker position relative to the deeper pockets of the wealthy and large corporations. Labor needs to explore alternatives in the political arena to reliance on the occasional nod in the labor's direction from Democratic and Republican Party leadership.
- **Build Bridges to Community Organizations:** Community, civic and issue-oriented organizations can be brought into a mutually beneficial coalition around issues of common concern. The Labor-Religion Coalition and the nascent Coalition to Save Long Island Jobs are but two local examples.
- **Forge Ties to Academia:** The idea of business/university partnerships is now well-established. The Hofstra University Business Development Center is a recent example of how a local university can work with local communities and business interests in mutually beneficial ways. In a similar fashion, there is much that local colleges and universities have to offer to workers and labor organizations in the way of expertise, technology, and other educational and research related resources.

The above listing is meant to be neither exhaustive nor exclusive. In some respects it is not even particularly original. Some of these approaches have been used for decades with varying degrees of success by labor organizers, unions, and activists. Others, however, are more novel adaptations to recent social, economic, and political developments. Taken as a whole, they are suggestive of the wide array of resources available to the labor community. And that is a good thing, because the conditions people face in their attempts to get jobs, when working on their jobs, and in trying to hold on to their jobs are incredibly diverse. The fact of the matter is that there is no single best way to protect and promote the interests of working people. We need to share ideas, compare notes, learn from one another, and work together. After all, what do we have to lose?

*Marc Silver is Chair of the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Hofstra University.*

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