Long Island Unions and the 2024 Election A Conversation with the LI Labor Federation Director

by Gregory DeFreitas

What role did labor unions play in the November 2024 elections and what impacts will the surprising results have on them and the millions of working people they represent?

New York City and Long Island are the most highly unionized metro area in the country. On Long Island alone, over one in four resident workers is a union member – over twice the national rate.[1] The Long Island Federation of Labor (LI Fed), is the umbrella coalition of over 160 AFL-CIO-affiliated unions, representing nearly 300,000 workers in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. Its current Executive Director is Ryan Stanton. A graduate of SUNY Binghampton and of Cornell University's Union Leadership Institute, he began his career in the central NY regional Office of Senator Charles Schumer (Dem, NY), before becoming Executive Assistant to long-time Congressman Steve Israel (Dem, LI). He is a member of the Suffolk County Workforce Development Board and serves on the Board of Directors of the United Way. He lives on Long Island with his wife and two young children.

Q: The November 5th election results could have big implications for working families. The exit polls say that about 55% of union households nationwide voted for Kamala Harris. The fact that over 40% of union households didn't vote for her has gotten lots of media comment – even though it's about the same, actually, as Biden got in 2020. What's your sense nationally, and on Long Island, of what factors lay behind that?

RS: As the executive director of the Long Island Federation of Labor, I am focused on Long Island. It's worth looking at the information you presented. If voter turnout for Harris among union members was at 55%, and she only garnered 49% of the national popular vote, we know that the Union movement is effective at communicating with our members. We are still a trusted institution and outperform the general public for pro-labor candidates.

Regardless of party affiliation, when we support a candidate, we bring a high level of engagement, voter participation and performance. And I would argue, that's a part of what our superpower is – not just that we can communicate with our members, but that they trust us. That's hard to find in institutions across the country at this moment in time.

Q: How would you describe Long Island unions' mobilization in the election? Were there some unions that explicitly came out for Donald Trump, or was it pretty uniformly pro-Harris?

RS: The LI Fed, because we're in New York State, was predominantly focused on Congressional, State Senate and State Assembly races. We targeted the 4th Assembly District in the New York State Assembly within our campaign to support John Avlon, who unfortunately was not successful in CD-1. The 4th Assembly District was represented by Steve Engelbright, for a long time, until he lost to Republican Ed Flood. We believed it would be exceptionally competitive this cycle. We also thought it was important for Long Island to have another voice in the majority in the New York State Assembly. We were fortunate to have a candidate, Rebecca Kassay, whose values and views on policy aligned with our views. She won by just a couple hundred votes. We certainly made the difference.

Unfortunately, we came up short in another assembly race. We supported Gina Sillitti in Nassau County. That was often overshadowed by everybody's focus on the 3rd Congressional District. The national discourse, and a conversation around who the next Speaker of the House would be played out here? Would it be Hakeem Jeffries, or Mike Johnson? Keeping the 3rd Congressional District was vital if we were going to have a Speaker from New York State.

Tom Suozzi is a phenomenal candidate, and an excellent member of Congress. We worked with him and his campaign in the special election, and then continued to support him in the General Election. And ultimately he was successful in getting elected, in a district that Trump won. Trump won the 4th Congressional district too. I haven't looked at the numbers lately, but, we know that in both the 3rd and the 4th districts, the Congressional candidates that we supported outperformed the top of the ticket. Unfortunately, we came up a little bit short in the 16th Assembly District, but we were clearly focused in the right areas.

Q: What do you think were the main issues that local voters had on their agenda – immigration, the economy, others?

RS: We know that nationally and locally, you have pundits that will say, 'Well, the economic indicators are good.' That was true.

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But, it doesn't change the fact that working people, a disproportionate number of working people, are living paycheck to paycheck and struggling. It's objectively true that the economy has gotten better over time, and policy decisions have consequences. The Biden-Harris Administration adopted policies that invested in working people.

But nobody walks into the grocery store and goes: "You know, the bipartisan infrastructure law is really good, so I don't mind the increased cost of eggs." The price of eggs have gone up, the price of milk has gone up. And then Republicans, correctly messaged that: "Inflation, inflation, inflation – everything's more expensive. It's their (Biden-Harris's) fault. The governing party is the problem."

Republicans were very effective at tying the pain people were feeling to the decisions of the governing party, in this case Democrats. True or not, you can't (legitimately) lay the consequences of inflation at the feet of the Democratic Party. Inflation was experienced globally, and the American economy came in for the soft landing that many economists thought was impossible. Inflation was not just a result of the policies that were adopted. It's not that cut and dry. However, it doesn't change the fact that the people were feeling that way, and experiencing real difficulty, providing for their family, struggling to put food on their table, a shirt on their child's back, and being concerned about whether or not they have a roof over their head.

It's hard to measure the things that didn't happen. It's difficult to measure the number of lives that were saved as a result of the policies that were adopted. Unfortunately, not enough people tried to tell that story, or did so effectively, reminding voters about the people that were able to keep their homes, keep their jobs, keep their health care because of the decisions that were made. Not to mention, we need a better conversation connecting investments in our energy infrastructure to investments in working people.

When it comes inflation, there wasn't much discussion about the fact that corporate profits didn't go down. Why is it that so many pundits, economists, and public officials have accepted the philosophy that the only way to tame inflation is for millions of Americans to lose their jobs. We don't have to accept that. Leaders have to do a better job talking about all the ways good policy decisions put money in the hands of working people and how that is the solution to, and not the driver, of inflation.

Q: Right. Economists like Claudia Sahm have long argued that the Fed's anti-inflation strategy of raising interest rates is a blunt instrument. So, if you just rely on the Fed – slowing down job growth by raising interest rates -- that hurts people's ability to get an affordable mortgage as it hurts business investment. In contrast, the Biden Administration focused on fiscal policies, but they were competing with the Fed strategy. Also, of course, the inflation was not US-based: it was international and supply driven.

Critics say that Biden and Harris did not convey that very well. Since the election, some are also saying that there was a broader problem with the Democrats' approach, at least nationally: that Harris was too much of an unknown quantity. She wasn't as clearly pro-working class as Biden, and that the Democrats need to really explicitly present themselves as the working class party. Do you think there's something to that point of view?

RS: The trade union movement is here to talk about the issues of people who work for a living. We're interested in working with anyone in either party who's willing to engage honestly on policies that put money in the hands of working people. That's what drives our economy and makes life better for the people that we're fortunate to represent.

The U.S. economy, I would argue, is the envy of the world right now. Inflation is under control. The economy had a soft landing that everyone said couldn't happen. However, it's important to recognize that saying those things still doesn't make buying eggs and milk and clothes for your kids feel any better. It's necessary to acknowledge the real struggles of everyday Americans' and remind them that we're investing in you and your community. It's going to take time for those investments to work. We're asking you to trust us to see it through.

Talking about economic indicators and metrics without acknowledging what people are feeling at the grocery store is tone deaf, and not a winning strategy. You have to demonstrate that you understand what people are going through. The Trump campaign acknowledged the struggles of working people. I don't believe the policies from Project 2025, or others that they adopted in the first Trump administration are actually going to make life better for working people. But, working people felt heard by the Trump campaign. They acknowledged their lived experience.

Q: Okay, this is obviously speculative, but what do you think are the likely possible consequences once the new administration starts in Washington? Trump has made a rather surprising nomination for Secretary of Labor, with Laurie Chavez de Raymer. Apparently the Teamsters President suggested her. And, as a Congresswoman, she voted for the PRO Act (Protecting the Right to Organize Act).

What do you think about that?

RS: Supporting the PRO Act is a great start. If the Secretary of Labor nominee is going to be given the latitude to work with Capitol Hill to get things done that are in the PRO Act, and policies like that, there is potential.

It's just that's not likely to happen based on the first Trump administration's record. This nomination reflects the possibility, and potential, for collaboration on policies that benefit workers. Only time will tell whether or not that's going to come to be.

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Q: Based on his first administration in 2017 to 2020, what do you think are unions' biggest fears about what might happen these next four years under Trump? Even if the new Secretary of Labor has some pro-union sympathies? In what areas do you think unions need to really build opposition as early as possible?

RS: My job is to work with our affiliates to get their agenda done. The National AFL-CIO will work with the international unions of our shared affiliates to set the union movement's federal policy agenda. We'll ultimately focus on what we all believe collectively will be the most impactful, and what has to be guarded against most vigorously.

Even with a labor secretary nominee who supported the PRO Act, the first Trump administration's record suggests things aren't necessarily looking good for working people. When you examine the rewriting of the tax law in 2017 you realize the effective tax rate for corporations reduced permanently, but teachers are no longer able to write off school supplies. Tax cuts that were made for people in the middle class have expired. This administration doesn't have to tell us where their priorities are. They have already shown us.

Ryan Stanton supporting Starbucks union drive in Lynbrook

Photo Credit: Long Island Federation of Labor.

Q: Assuming that we're probably going to get more of the same, that may mean attempts to cutback on overtime pay, appoint a more pro-business NLRB (National Labor Relations Board) and threaten public sector unionization and collective bargaining rights nationally. Are there new ways that you think labor on Long Island should mobilize in the next year or so to try to make sure that unions remain a strong force?

RS: The Fed is focused on Long Island opportunities. If we remain focused on Long Island, we can continue to make life better for folks, regardless of what's happening in Albany and Washington. We'll do our part to defend attacks on working people coming out of those places, but we have opportunities right here at home to make life better.

For example, in the November elections 72% of voters adopted the Suffolk County Water Quality Restoration Act. Suffolk County has about 380,000 parcels that are unsewered and don't have any sort of treatment systems for wastewater. For a number of years there has been a subsidy program that incentivizes the installation of advanced onsite septic systems. The adoption of the Suffolk County Water Quality Restoration Act established a permanent funding stream for that program, sets up a Water Quality Restoration Fund, and extends the Drinking Water Protection Fund. Passage of this referendum is going to deliver $4 billion of investment in wastewater infrastructure over 50 years.

We're currently leaching nitrogen into our bays and estuaries. It's impacting our tourism economy. It's shutting down beaches. We're all going to benefit from the implementation of this law. It improves water quality on Long Island, whether it is in your community or neighboring communities, we all stand to benefit. Not to mention the direct investment in wastewater infrastructure puts the building and construction trades to work.

The union movement has been a driver of the law's adoption. We were at the center of passing a referendum that 7 in 10 voters in Suffolk County agreed on. Find me any other issue that 7 in 10 voters agree on.

We know how to connect with working people of both parties. We'll continue to do that to deliver a better future for our children and our grandchildren. Civilization can't survive without clean water.

Q: And how would you describe the Long Island Fed's role in trying to expand wind power locally? Is promoting more alternative energy sources a continuing campaign for your members?

RS: Absolutely. And you picked the perfect day to ask that question. I don't know if you caught the latest issue of Newsday, but today they published an Op-ed by John Durso, our president. He's asking New York State to go big in NYSERDA's upcoming solicitation decision. It's an investment in our energy, infrastructure.

We can invest in a cleaner, brighter future that builds out offshore wind, puts people to work, and invests in our communities. We can have baseload generation to ensure reliability. Our political discourse sets up false choices for the public all the time. We can have both.

South Fork Wind and Sunrise Wind are examples of how investments in energy infrastructure can be a bipartisan initiative. Suffolk County has a Republican County Executive in Ed Romaine. Both projects began under a Democratic County Executive (Steve Bellone), and a Republican town supervisor (then-Ed Romaine.) The council person who represented the district where the cable landing happened is a Republican (Dan Panico), who's now the Brookhaven Town Supervisor. The Republican controlled County Legislature passed a Home Rule message for a parkland alienation bill, which made the cable landing for Sunrise Wind possible.

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It's noteworthy that the lead sponsors on the state companion parkland alienation bill were Republicans. Furthermore, it was signed by Kathy Hochul a Democratic governor who has championed offshore wind. Democrats and Republicans worked together at the state, county, and town levels to move things forward. And, this all got done with the Biden-Harris administration permitting the projects. Bi-partisan at every turn.

Q: Many people express surprise that unions went beyond their own direct wage/benefit issues to play a leading role in fighting for more alternative energy sources. But, I interviewed Chris Erickson, the Local 3 electrician union leader, recently, and he said that they're confident there's going to be lots of new jobs in green energy going forward. There's really a demand for a lot more skilled workers that unions can provide. Would you agree with that assessment?

RS: Yes. On Long Island, the environment and the economy, are intertwined and should never be considered separately. Supporting renewable energy is a win and must create good union jobs. We don't need to accept the narrative that you can either have one or the other. We can and must continue to support our brothers and sisters in the utility sector. And, we can build renewable energy infrastructure to have a cleaner grid and a cleaner economy. We can and must do both.

Q: Another proposed project that supporters say could be a job generator is the Sands Resort complex that's been proposed for the Nassau Hub. What would you say to those who argue, for example that nearby roads are already congested and it's on the edge of a university campus, so maybe it should go somewhere else.

RS: The Sands has so far only obtained an operational lease on the property. All that did was provide economic certainty for the people that currently rely on the Coliseum for employment. 400 full-time equivalent jobs are now supported by the Nassau County Veterans Memorial. Coliseum. As a Long Islander, I don't think we should jeopardize them.

Q: Are those mostly union jobs?

RS: Yes, a significant share are union jobs. It's important to note that at the end of the day the union movement fights for policies, like paid family leave and increased minimum wage, and all sorts of initiatives that benefit union members and non-union workers alike. We are a movement of people who are interested in and invested in making life better for working people, whether they're currently a member or not. One of the several reasons the union movement is invested in seeing the Sands integrated resort proposal be successful is there are tens of thousands of jobs, union jobs at stake, both construction jobs as well as permanent operations jobs. New York State has a proprietary interest. Thus, they've put labor standards in place the increase or in some case almost guarantee they will be union jobs. A project labor agreement is going to govern the construction of the integrated resort proposal.

It's important to mention that less than 10% of the proposal is dedicated to gaming. Therefore, 90 to 94% of a $6 billion proposal is invested in non-gaming initiatives and entertainment. That's money invested in the people of Long Island. I's meant to be an integrated resort and entertainment hub that is going to make Long Island a destination. We have unbelievable assets here, a national seashore, Montauk, and everybody knows the Hamptons. And then you have a whole swath of Long Island that is beautiful and is unknown to the outside world.

This is an opportunity to create tens of thousands of union jobs, invest $6 billion in our region, and invest in a sustainable way. It is going to create recurring tax revenue, not just for the host county, but the host town, as well as a smaller amount for the neighboring county. This is not just an investment in the private sector. We are sustaining the public sector in a way that's not on the backs of the people that call this place home. It's going to create sales tax from people traveling here as a destination.

Long Islanders' biggest issues are traffic, taxes, and economic certainty. And you can see, through the public draft environmental impact statement, a number of proposals that they've made, including investment in the Meadowbrook Parkway and other measures to mitigate traffic. We have an organization that's willing to attack the traffic challenges we face directly, and make investments in our roadway infrastructure in a way that, without that that $6 billion investment, would not necessarily be possible.

And we're making it a destination, you know, if I have to read one more article in the newspaper about the brain drain going on Long Island and New York State, and that we don't have opportunities ... Well, here's an opportunity. There are tens of thousands of union jobs at stake, and union jobs are good jobs. As a region we shouldn't be turning our nose up at that. Fortunately, most people haven't. The vast majority of people have decided to support the SandsNY project.

If the opponents of the Sands integrated resort are successful, gaming is not going away. The members of our communities, young and old, can access gaming on their phone. They do now. They do today. What they don't have is an institution that's going to invest resources in identifying people with problem gambling. There isn't private sector investment to identify people with addiction, and then turning around and funding initiatives to do something about it. The organizations that have an app on your phone are not investing in our community to make sure that those with a problem get the help they need. If the integrated resort is developed there will be trained human professionals with access to those who are currently gambling on their phones and underground. The Family and Children's Association, and many others who are leading experts in the region to address these issues, have spoken directly about the initiatives proposed to help those who need it.

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Q: Anything else you'd like to share about unions or working families on Long Island?

RS: Yes, job safety. We've worked with building trades affiliates to establish an OSHA30 safety standard on Long Island. Some towns have adopted it, others have not yet.

I work in an office, right? I walk out the door of my home every day, knowing I'm likely to return. My work environment is pretty safe. But, if you read the Skyline Report by NYCOSH (New York Committee on Occupational Safety and Health) you will learn that a construction worker dies once every 5 days in the State of New York, and 86% of those are non-union jobsites. More than 3 in 4 deaths occur on non-union job sites.

If you're on a non-union job site, or working an open shop project, where you have a mix of union and non union you're facing serious risk. The union part of the workforce was trained to work safe, but you don't know about the rest of the workforce. Maybe they were trained to work safe, but maybe not. We don't know. In the non-union sector there is no regulated training apparatus, like the New York State certified apprenticeship programs that are administered by the building trades unions.

Their apprenticeship programs put the most skilled workers on a job, and they know how to work safe. We're not going to towns and asking people to regulate union or non-union. We are asking them to regulate the industry and set a standard for what it means to work safe. We were fortunate that in the town of Brookhaven. Dan Panico stepped up and worked with the Town Board to adopt it. Others have adopted it, but there is more work to do.

The day of the Brookhaven press conference announcing that they were adopting it, I told a story, a true story. I walked out of my door that day, and there's not a day I walk out that I don't forget my keys or my wallet, or something. My 3-year-old was sitting at the dining room table, and he goes: "Oh, Dad, you forgot your keys." And I said, "No, no, I got him right here, Buddy." Then he says: "Dad, you forgot your gym bag." And I go: "No, no, William, I went to the gym this morning." and finally he goes: "Oh, dad, you forgot your hug."

I hug my son and my daughter, and I give them a kiss every day when I walk out the door. On that day I only gave him a kiss. I tell this story, because I'm pretty confident that I'm going home every day after work. The Skyline Report makes clear that when you work in construction that's not a guarantee. When you work on an open shop job, or in a non-union setting, it is less and less likely that you're going home at the end of the day.

The least we can do, union or non-union, is set a safety standard that contractors and workers have to live up to. We're fortunate to have members of both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party on Long Island that are willing to work with us to get that done. That is some of the most important work we do. You know, everybody thinks about unions as delivering economic benefits and advantages and increases in pay, and that's good, and that's true. We also ensure that the workplace is safe, and that people get to go home at night and hug their kids. I want everyone to have what I have.

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[1] DeFreitas, Gregory, "The State of New York Unions 2022," *Regional Labor Review* (Fall 2022).

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