These are interesting times for Long Island labor unions. Almost every day, newspapers are filled with stories about one level of government or the other looking to balance their budgets by laying off workers, cutting the benefits of organized workers or negotiating givebacks. On May 21, 2012, the Republican-dominated Nassau County legislature proposed a bill that would, in effect, completely undermine collective bargaining. This happened at the end of their legislative session after it had been announced that the bill would be tabled. The leadership slyly waited until nearly everyone, including the unions, had left the room. The republican majority passed the bill with only a few observing their deception. The legislation, which gives the county executive free reign to make changes in union contracts in order to achieve his targets for savings in the budget, is probably illegal. If he takes the action the legislation provides, it will be up to the courts to decide if it stands.

We can see union-busting happening all over the country. From Wisconsin to Indiana to Ohio to New Jersey, the agenda of the Republican Party is clear. It is 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 carriers 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 that elected Republicans who 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 machine. But there has been an “understanding” that on Long Island, Republicans were “different”. They were different from the knee-jerk anti-labor Republicans that were found 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. Union leaders regularly served as Republican committeemen. 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 which moved to Long Island from one of New York City’s five boroughs. Many have stayed true to their working class roots. As they and their families moved to the Island, they regularly enrolled as Republicans. And even when they didn’t enroll with the party, their unions, with only a few exceptions, supported republican candidates. The strategy for many Long Island union leaders, as they attest today, was to work for the election of a Republican state senate and a Democratic assembly. By dividing the legislature into two opposing camps, labor could play one off against the other and assure a good quality of life for their members.

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 or 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 of machine politics and labor unions diverge? Why is the 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?

Today there are approximately 250,000 union members on Long Island. One out of every four families has a union member. It is the fourth largest labor movement in the country.

How did unions get to this point and how do they regain their political power? I asked labor leaders and activists on Long Island for their views on this conundrum. I prefaced that question with another one – 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 2012, in most of the New York City council districts, and in most of the city 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 on Long Island. Many of the people moving onto the island came from one of the five boroughs of New York City. Ask almost anyone who lives on Long Island where their family came from and you will most likely hear the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens and on occasion, Manhattan. And, as the president of the Nassau PBA Jim Carver told me,”Everyone joined the Republicans when they moved here.”

3 Long Island Federation of Labor http://longislandfed.org/
5 Interview with James Carver, Nassau County PBA President, April 19, 2012. 89 East Jericho Turnpike Mineola, N.Y.
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, not the least of which was caused by the razing 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 low 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 sprung 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 was responsible for building the parkways and roads to reach the state parks that he built 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 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 decade 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 small 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 overrode 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 little time for partisan political activity.

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6 Many of these low interest loans were denied to Black soldiers thereby guaranteeing all-white neighborhoods. See Katznelson, Ira When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in 20th Century America. NY, W.W. Norton & Co., 2005. Chapter 5.
However, even in those early years, astute Republican leaders recognized the potential votes of 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 early patronage paid off in years to come by establishing the groundwork for Republican Party organization among Italian Americans.

This early presence of the Republican Party among Italian Americans became more important in the post-war years as Italian Americans grew to be the largest ethnic group on the island. While many of the former city dwellers may have been democrats or voted democratic in city elections, the Republican Party provided opportunity to the new arrivals. If you lived in the city and you needed a summer job or a pothole fixed on your street, you went to the Democratic precinct captain. On Long Island, you went to the Republican committeeman. As former city dwellers, Italian Americans understood the party machine. In fact, during the 1930’s, in New York City, Italian Americans had “more active political clubs than any other city nationality group.”

The experience of Italian-Americans was similar to every other ethnic group that moved to Long Island, albeit in larger numbers. Since the Republican Party was already established on Long Island, it made sense to register with the party in power. Party leaders could get things done for you if you needed them. Party leaders could get you a job.

The population explosion of the 50’s and 60’s led to a demand for government services. Providing services, especially by county and local government, meant creating jobs. On Long Island, the Civil Service Commission handled all county jobs. The commission was made up of part-time political appointees who ruled on the job applications. Job applications were processed by an Executive Secretary who was appointed by the county executive but could be fired by the commission. The executive secretary was also responsible for administering tests and day-to-day operations. Some municipalities like Long Beach, Hempstead and Glen Cove all had their own commissions. While state statute called for mandatory testing and written specifications for civil service jobs, there was no statutory requirement for municipal government to follow state civil service rules.

This is how it worked. If you wanted a job, you went to a party leader.

In Nassau County, new hires were generally temporary or provisional appointments. In 1956 in Nassau County, for example, 41 per cent of county civil service employees and two thirds of town and village workers, with the exception of police officers, were temporary appointees. Hiring provisional employees also took place in Suffolk County but not to the same extent as its neighbor to the west. In 1961 in Suffolk County only 14 per cent of the county’s 2500 workers were temporary employees. In a 1972 newspaper article, Republican Party sources acknowledged that before any new applicant was hired for a county government job, “he is cleared through Republican headquarters to determine whether his employment has been approved by his local Republican leader and (Joe) Margiotta.”

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11 By the 1970’s Italian Americans were the largest nationality in both Nassau and Suffolk Counties. Salvatore J. LaGumina “Italian American Political Activity” page 59 in LaValle (ed.)
With no enforceable civil service rules and regulations, job applicants and employees became dependent on the relationships that they developed with the power structure. Starting in 1968 until 1983, as head of the Nassau County Republicans, Joe Margiotta fine-tuned the patronage system available to party leaders to build one of the most successful political machines in the country.

Another way to get hired was to have a relative, who had the connections with the party, to get a job for you. In 1977, 93% of the 601 summer jobs available in Hempstead “went to persons with GOP connections”. In addition, 74% of the 2,311 total summer jobs of Nassau County, Hempstead, Oyster Bay and Hempstead went to “enrolled Republicans or to persons whose family members were republicans.”

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 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.

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.’”

Getting a government job, particularly in Nassau County or one the towns and villages, came with a price. As early as 1952, if you had a job with the town or city, the “rule of thumb” was to contribute one percent of your annual salary to the Republican Party. According to Margiotta, this rule was seen “as an acceptable contribution from public employees.”

Part of the formula for the success of the GOP machine was that many Republican committeemen were the heads of town departments or held key supervisory positions. By 1973, the GOP county chairman said that anywhere from “50 to 75 percent of the party’s nearly 2,000 committeemen are on public payrolls.” In Nassau, there were 2 committeemen in 971 districts. Part of their job was to raise $400.00 in contributions from each election district. He was also responsible for selling tickets to republican events and to make sure that voters turned out on Election Day. More importantly, the committeemen collected the “contributions” of one percent from the public employees who owed their

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jobs to the political machine. This made it easy for party leaders to keep track of who contributed and who didn’t.

And what happened if you didn’t contribute to the party? It was understood that raises and promotions were contingent upon contributions. As one Republican source said to a newspaper reporter, “This is the deal. If you don’t give your one percent you don’t get a raise” or a promotion.

This system, attributed to Nassau County chair Joe Margiotta, made the Republican Party very wealthy. By 1973, with 23 full-time workers, the administrative staff of the Nassau County Republicans was the same size as the state Republican committee. The staffers had high salaries with medical, dental, insurance benefits and a pension plan. Margiotta’s Republican committee dominated almost all of Nassau’s local governments, including many of their more than 25,000 jobs. Because the expectation was that government employees would contribute one percent of their salary, buy tickets to fundraisers and work on elections, in return for promotions, patronage and job security, the Republican Party was able to build an army of workers that could virtually guarantee re-election of their candidates. That was the system. As George Washington Plunkitt said, “Men ain’t in politics for nothin’. They want to get somethin’ out of it.” So that during the 1960’s, even with the democrats in control of county government, “there were enough jobs left in Nassau’s three republican-controlled town administrations to care for the basic employment needs of the party.”

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 and that loyalty counted for something. There were complaints about the one percent rule. But many Long Islanders, even those who were not employed with any municipality, understood the system. They knew that if they wanted something from the town or county, they had to go to their election district committeeman. 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 Democrats controlled the Nassau County government in the 1960’s, they, too, solicited contributions from employees. They went further than the Republicans; the Democrats asked for three percent of employees’ annual salary. However, the biggest difference between the democrats and the republicans was that the democrats weren’t very successful at collecting. Democrats raised money by selling ads in party journals to businesses that wanted to government contracts. That is how the Democrats raised $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 old adage “you can’t lose what you don’t have” applied; the unpredictability of elections made businesses were more reluctant to contribute to the democrats.

Since workers had no collective bargaining rights, public employees often went along with the system and those in charge in order to get as much as they could. 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.

22 Newsday “Money, Men and Patronage Oil Nassau’s County’s GOP Machine.” Alan Eysen, Newsday Mar. 11, 1973 pg.7 23 Ibid.
and to go with hat in hand to complain about grievances.”  

This is also one of the reasons why CSEA did not endorse candidate for the state assembly and state senate until 1970.

In 1967, the passage of the Taylor Law granted collective bargaining rights for public employees. This changed everything. Organizations of workers could now negotiate wages and working conditions with their government employers. It now appeared possible that workers would no longer be dependent on the largesse of political operatives and personal relationships.

In Nassau and Suffolk Counties, based on their long-standing relationships with elected officials, CSEA quickly moved for recognition as representatives for county and town workers. Without holding elections, the association 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. Encouraged by the new law, other unions challenged CSEA for the right to represent government employees. In response to those challenges, CSEA changed its message and its leaders became far more militant for workers rights. Representation elections were held, and in some instances government workers chose unions other than CSEA for representation. Regardless of who represented the workers, unions meant contracts and contracts meant that those who conducted government business the old way, based on party politics, were facing new challenges.

Other events occurred during the late 1960’s and the 1970’s that changed the relationship that public employees had with their employers. In 1976, a top Margiotta aide and six Hempstead officials were indicted in a joint federal-county probe of the payment of the one percent by public employees to the GOP. Newsday conducted one investigation after another and ran stories about nepotism and the “good old boy system” of the Nassau County Republicans. There were county and federal investigations. A continuous stream of negative articles about the operations of Joe Margiotta’s political machine ran in the newspapers through the 70’s. The one percenter rule was called called a “kickback”. Hiring friends and relatives was “patronage oil” for the machine. Arrests and convictions of town employees who were also GOP committeemen followed. By 1983, Nassau County Chairman Joe Margiotta, whose political reach had once extended into the governor’s office, was tried and convicted.

With and unions now able to bargain instead of beg, and party leaders jailed, a new paradigm was established. The question for the party now was, to quote George Washington Plunkitt, “How are you goin’ to interest our young men... if you have no offices to give them when they work for their party?”

Margiotta may have gone to jail but what remained was a political culture, a unique blend of urban ethnic machine-based politics with a decidedly suburban flavor. With friend hiring friend, who did a favor for a neighbor, it was still a lot about who you knew rather than what you knew. The quid pro quo in GOP politics, especially in Nassau County, was that employees served Republican Party during the 1950’s and 1960’s to get and keep their job and in return the Republican Party was pro worker. Today’s union leaders and activists on Long Island grew and matured during this period. Many of them were told by parents and grandparents to register as Republicans if they wanted to get or keep a job. They were told this not for ideological reasons but for practical ones.

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24 Newsday “CSEA Facing Test of Strength” Maureen O’Neill Aug. 13, 1970 pg.10
25 Ibid
26 William L. Riordon 1963 Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics, Delivered by Ex-senator George Washington Plunkitt, the Tammany Philosopher, from His Rostrum— the New York County Court House Bootblack Stand. Chapter 9