

Razzle Dazzle

Unions' Lament: Hard Out Here for a Wimp

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By RICHARD STEIER |

“Labor has become the new Welfare Queen of this nation,” Greg Floyd said Aug. 4. “We have become the scapegoat for all the crises the nation is facing now.”

Where the Welfare Queen myth as popularized by President Reagan revolved around a shiftless woman using aliases to collect numerous public-assistance grants, the updated version has public employees guzzling the nation’s wealth by chug-a-lugging “Cadillac health plans” and pension benefits a corporate executive would envy.

Yet somehow, the president of Teamsters Local 237 said, those employees in many cases live paycheck to paycheck until they can afford to retire on a pension that is hardly munificent, and do so while in the political gun-sights not just of right-wing Republicans but of supposedly liberal Democrats.

Five days earlier, he had published an article in the Huffington Post that stated, “New York pension funds have regained almost all their value since the economic collapse, and yet some Democratic leaders want to make pension cuts their main objectives for next year. To balance the budget, wages and benefits for state workers were cut, but taxes on the rich were abandoned. It appears New York state has never had a more Republican agenda.”

If Governor Cuomo’s antennae were vibrating, they weren’t wrong, Mr. Floyd said. “I understand budgets and I understand the need to make sacrifice,” he remarked. “What I don’t understand is the need to sacrifice labor on every issue. The only thing I hear is a Republican agenda.”

‘Taking His Cue From Republicans’

Asked what he thought was driving Mr. Cuomo, he said, “I think he’s behaving this way because the national agenda is being set by Republicans and is something he sees as successful.”

Particularly distressing, he said, was when Willie Brown, the Democratic ex-Mayor of San Francisco, recently proposed that Mr. Cuomo bump Joe Biden from the lower half of the party’s presidential ticket next year because he had the gumption to get tough with the public-employee unions, “as if that were a badge of courage for the Democrats.”

It becomes clear, though, talking to Mr. Floyd and other union officials, that much of their discontent with the state of the nation is that President Obama seems to be suffering from a toughness deficit when it comes to negotiating with Republican leaders on issues that are the bedrock of his party and many of its constituents.

Referring to the earlier part of the debt-ceiling talks, when it briefly looked as if Mr. Obama might actually succeed in promoting some job growth and tightening tax loopholes that benefit wealthy Americans and corporations by throwing cuts in social programs into the pot, Mr. Floyd said, “You’re putting Social Security and Medicare on the table—you’ve already put the unions on the table. The Republicans have never put anything connected to [raising] revenues on the table.

“But,” he continued, “I don’t understand the Tea Party, because it’s made up of working people, and I don’t know what the Republican Party or the Koch brothers have done to make them want to work against their own interests.”

He concluded the Huffington Post piece by asking whether the unions “should start our own party and run for office ourselves?” Mr. Floyd said last week that he is “actively considering” running for Mayor “because of what is happening to labor,” but he acknowledged that building a viable labor party was unrealistic and that the best shot might be to use labor militancy to prod Democrats in the same way that the Tea Party has prodded Republicans to stand firm on traditional issues.

No Viable Alternatives

One Washington-based labor official from a major public-employee union said there was a growing disillusionment with Mr. Obama’s

failure to deliver on matters that count. But any thought of disengaging from the Democratic Party to express disenchantment didn't last long, he said, because "what are you gonna do? You're talking about working with Republicans? Who? Tim Pawlenty and Michele Bachmann? Where is Nelson Rockefeller and Jacob Javits?"

As dead as the Rockefeller Republicanism the two men embodied four decades ago. But, the union official added, "What is frustrating is when you can't tell a Democrat from a Republican."

Like Mr. Floyd, he had Mr. Cuomo in mind. Yet the Governor is still scoring high in public-opinion polls, despite his having forced the leaders of the two largest state-employee unions to eat a three-year wage freeze accompanied by other major givebacks while never entertaining an extension of the temporary income-tax surcharge on wealthier New Yorkers.

There might appear to be a paradox at work: Mr. Obama, fighting hard to ensure that there is true shared sacrifice, finds his poll numbers slipping, while Mr. Cuomo stays high despite a transparent bias toward those who are better off at the expense of public employees. Distasteful as some of his actions have been, Mr. Cuomo projects a sense of competence and decisiveness, where Mr. Obama's good intentions have often fallen short of accomplishing key goals. That tendency brings unfortunate comparisons to Jimmy Carter, whose honest assessment that "sometimes there are no easy answers" was parried by Ronald Reagan during the 1980 campaign. Much as Mr. Carter's camp strived to portray Mr. Reagan as someone whose clear-eyed, sometimes-simplistic view of the world led him to miss important nuances, voters' misgivings were overcome in sufficient numbers by confidence that Mr. Reagan wouldn't be paralyzed by the job and its challenges.

As Mr. Floyd put it last week, "People like winners, and they tend to go with the winner."

There was word out of Washington last week that some Republican Congressmen were alarmed that their Tea Party brethren were out of control, and that House Majority Leader Eric Cantor had undermined Speaker John Boehner at every turn in the debt-ceiling talks, rendering him more a figurehead than his party's Washington leader. Yet Mr. Boehner had acted as if his stutter-step negotiations with the President were precipitated by Mr. Obama's trying to up the ante on a deal including new tax revenue, rather than a consequence of his discovering his own caucus wanted no part of any tax bump no matter how much was gained in the bargain.

Tea Partiers Still Steaming

Perhaps the most-remarkable aspect of the debt-ceiling windup was that polls following the deal's consummation showed that more Democrats approved of it than did members of the Tea Party, who got virtually everything they wanted, most notably a lack of new taxes or loophole-closings and an embarrassing setback for Mr. Obama, who had less sway over Congress than Grover Norquist, the radical anti-tax absolutist turned mover-and-shaker. That only 22 percent of those identifying themselves as Tea Party members expressed satisfaction with the deal suggested they might have an edge in the bruising political battles because they managed to stay angry no matter how well they were doing, while Democrats turned their anger at being pushed around against either themselves or the President.

That doesn't mean Mr. Obama is a victim of bad luck or unfortunate circumstances. More than 2 ½ years into his term, he can no longer use the excuse that he never imagined his political opponents could be so unreasonable. As Times columnist Paul Krugman noted a month before the debt-ceiling negotiations blew up and opened the door for last week's travesty of a deal, the President surrendered precious leverage last December when he didn't insist that the debt-ceiling issue be addressed as part of the negotiation in which he backed off his plan to discontinue the portion of the Bush tax cuts received by wealthier Americans. Mr. Krugman wrote that Mr. Obama said at the time that "nobody, Democratic or Republican, is willing to see the full faith and credit of the United States government collapse," adding that he was confident Mr. Boehner would accept his "responsibilities to govern."

Where's LBJ When You Need Him?

"I was naïve" are three words nobody wants to hear the President utter. In many ways, Mr. Obama is a far more admirable human being than two other Presidents who came from similarly modest backgrounds, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, but he could use a few helpings of the tougher and even nastier parts of their characters to be an effective leader when confronted by elected officials who seem intent on making him a one-term President no matter how much they damage the country in the process.

Following his Aug. 2 appearance before the AFL-CIO Executive Council, the Washington-based union official said, "I don't think there's a sense that Obama feels our pain. That's a problem: does he get it? It's hard to feel enthusiastic right now. Actions speak louder than words these days, and we're not seeing a whole lot of action."

What is also striking is that Mr. Obama and his aides have sometimes seemed most impassioned in public not in taking on the Republicans

who have waylaid his agenda but in responding to his critics on the left who believe he has been too accommodating to his enemies. Last December, amid criticism that he had wimped out on the budget deal by agreeing to maintain all the Bush tax cuts, he suggested that too many liberals were so intent on purity of purpose that they ignored the importance of compromise in actually getting things accomplished.

Forget About Being Loved

Increasingly, those critics are asking what exactly he thinks he has accomplished, and union officials are asking how much longer they can plausibly look to the President for leadership. The Machiavellian question of whether it is better to be loved or feared has no relevance when dealing with forces that will never love you and have never been given a reason to so much as respect you.

As Mr. Floyd put it, “You’ve gotta fight the bullies. How long are you going to give the bullies your lunch?”

Unless he figures out an answer and how to make it work, Mr. Obama may not have to do it beyond the end of next year.

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