

# Basil Paterson Recalled As Wise Man of Labor

By RICHARD STEIER | Posted: Monday, April 21, 2014 5:15 pm

Basil A. Paterson, perhaps best known as a powerhouse in Harlem politics whose son David became New York's first black Governor, was remembered following his death at 87 April 17 by union leaders as a mentor and bargaining counsel who combined wisdom and calm to great advantage.

"Basil Paterson was the rare individual who knew how to talk to people, he knew what to say to people and he also knew when to say it," said Teamsters Local 237 President Gregory Floyd.

## 'Taught Us So Much'

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, who retained Mr. Paterson as outside labor counsel for the United Federation of Teachers upon becoming its president in 1997 and continued to seek his advice when she moved on to the AFT 12 years later, described him as "always being a consigliere in the truest sense of the word." Referring to her counterpart at the city's giant health-care union, Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union, she said, "Both George Gresham and I always say he taught us so much."

One of the most potent arrows in Mr. Paterson's quiver was his sense of diplomacy. In 2006, he was thrust into a difficult spot when, following a three-day transit strike the previous December, the rank and file of Transport Workers Union Local 100 voted down the wage contract that ended the walkout by just seven votes out of more than 22,000 cast. That forced the pact into arbitration, where the panel's chairman was George Nicolau. Mr. Paterson served as Local 100 President Roger Toussaint's representative, and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's chief negotiator, Gary Dellaverson, was the management rep.

Relations between Mr. Toussaint and Mr. Dellaverson had been tense even before the strike. They got worse during the walkout, and more coals were tossed upon the fire when, after tabloid accounts of the contract made it seem like a big win for the union, the MTA Director of Labor Relations held a press conference on New Year's Day of 2006 to highlight what he called key gains for management.

## Infuriated by Move

Mr. Toussaint was furious, claiming Mr. Dellaverson had violated an agreement not to make public pronouncements on the deal's pros and cons until after union members voted on it. His mood did not improve when it was narrowly rejected three weeks later.

But Mr. Nicolau, who knew Mr. Paterson going back to his own days running an anti-poverty

program for Mayor John Lindsay in the 1960s when Mr. Paterson was a State Senator whose political clout eclipsed his office, said he made sure none of the bad blood seeped into the three-man panel's discussions. "He was very good at being able to smooth things out," he said. With some minor tinkering, the three men later that year produced an award that closely resembled the rejected terms.

They had also crossed paths, Mr. Nicolau said during a phone interview from Ireland, where he was vacationing, in founding the Institute for Mediation and Conflict Resolution along with Theodore Kheel in the 1970s.

"He was a terrific guy," he said of Mr. Paterson. "He was so sharp; he just knew his stuff."

### **Salvaged What He Could**

Mr. Floyd got his first up-close look at Mr. Paterson in 1999, when he was beginning to rise through the ranks of Local 237. Elevator Mechanics represented by the union had turned down a long-delayed pay deal that would have meant another \$8,000 a year for them, Mr. Floyd said, only to discover that they had miscalculated. Mr. Paterson, in his role as outside labor counsel, went to the bargaining table and, though he was unable to recoup the entire award that members had rejected, got them a decent chunk.

At the meeting to present the revised terms, Mr. Floyd recalled, "the Elevator Mechanics stood up and applauded, and he said, "Don't applaud me—applaud the union."

Eight years later, when Mr. Floyd became Local 237 president after Carl Haynes retired, he said Mr. Paterson was "a mentor for me transitioning into the job. He was one of the people I could call for good, sound advice. He knew New York City, he knew the politics, he knew the players."

Mr. Paterson was one of the four Harlem-based political leaders known as "The Gang of Four," with the others being Congressman Charles B. Rangel; the late Percy Sutton, who was Manhattan Borough President before making two unsuccessful runs for Mayor, and David N. Dinkins, who in 1989 was elected the city's first African-American Mayor. There were more than a few who believed Mr. Paterson might have beaten him to the punch four years earlier, when a coalition of black and white liberal leaders pressed him to challenge two-term incumbent Ed Koch for the job. Mr. Paterson declined, later explaining he had a heart condition that he didn't disclose at the time for fear it would hurt his law practice, and Mr. Koch, against the less-formidable Carol Bellamy, easily won a third term.

### **Falling-Out With Koch**

Mr. Paterson had actually been one of Mr. Koch's top aides at the start of his administration, serving as Deputy Mayor for Labor Relations, but he left after a year in the job. Part of the reason

was said to be tensions that had developed because of Mr. Koch's policies that critics said came at the expense of some black residents, placing Mr. Paterson in an uncomfortable spot, although there were also disagreements between the two of them on labor issues.

Mr. Paterson, while known as a conciliator—in his recent autobiography, Mr. Dinkins recalled his friend getting in between him and the militant firebrand Sonny Carson at the 1972 National Black Political Convention when a disagreement about tactics was about to turn physical—had been very much shaped by the civil-rights movement and the changes it had brought to New York, as well as the rest of the nation. Ms. Weingarten said it was a hurdle she had to clear when she sought to bring in Mr. Paterson as her outside bargaining counsel because three decades earlier, then-UFT President Albert Shanker had matched some of the angry rhetoric of black militants in a dispute over school control with some tough talk of his own during the extended 1968 Teachers strike.

“It was almost as if he interviewed me” for the job, she said from Washington. “I had to pitch myself. I think I had to convince him because there had always been some skepticism about the UFT because of our [past] relationship with the [black] community.”

### **‘Champion of Workers’**

UFT President Michael Mulgrew said Mr. Paterson's “wise counsel was essential in my first years as UFT president. He was a champion of the rights of Teachers and of all workers.”

District Council 37 Executive Director Lillian Roberts, who knew him for more than 40 years, called him “an honest, knowledgeable and trusted friend who could always be relied on to generously lend an ear or share his wisdom and insight.”

After leaving the Koch administration at the beginning of 1979, Mr. Paterson became Secretary of State under Gov. Hugh Carey, stepping into the job that had been vacated by Mario M. Cuomo to become Lieutenant Governor. He spent virtually all of his career after he left along with Mr. Carey at the end of 1982 working for the law firm of Meyer, Suozzi, English & Klein as a key player in its considerable labor practice.

He had a sometimes-fractious relationship with his son, David. Some attributed it to his over-protectiveness due to David's being legally blind but it also had to do with the younger man's moving outside Basil's political circle. In 2006, when then-State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer was seeking a running mate in his campaign for Governor, the elder Paterson was supporting Leecia Eve, an upstate official whose father Arthur had been an influential legislator. Mr. Spitzer instead chose David Paterson, who at the time was Minority Leader of the State Senate.

### **A Prayer for New Governor**

When Mr. Spitzer resigned in March 2008 following a prostitution scandal, David succeeded him.

He called his father, who reportedly told him to “say a prayer.”

“I’ve already said a prayer for Eliot,” the new Governor replied.

“That’s good,” his father said. “Now you’d better say one for yourself.”

A bit more than 18 months later, Governor Paterson found himself under siege, facing a strong challenge for Governor the following year from then-Attorney General Andrew Cuomo while fending off a mini-scandal involving tickets he received for free for the first game of the 2009 World Series and a more-serious one involving an alleged attempt to try to prevent allegations of domestic violence against one of his top advisers, David “D.J.” Johnson, from becoming public. Some insiders said the younger Paterson was floundering because he had relied on advice from Mr. Johnson and another confidant, Clemmie Harris, while not seeking the counsel of his father. At that point, Basil got more involved in trying to extricate his son from the political messes, but it was too late to revive his candidacy and he opted not to seek a full term the following year when it became clear Mr. Cuomo had a huge lead in the polls.

### **Cuomo: Model Leader**

The Governor following his death called Mr. Paterson “a model of public leadership.” Noting his Army service during World War II, he said he “put his commitment to this state and our nation first.”

Mayor de Blasio called him “a progressive giant who committed his life to lifting up others. While Basil will certainly be missed, his legacy of progress and achievement will continue to resonate in New York for generations to come.”

Congressman Rangel, who referred to him as “my best friend and brother,” said, “In everything he did in and out of office, Basil was a pioneer who blazed the trail for a generation of leaders in Harlem, in our city and across the state. Basil broke so many barriers, giving voice to our community in his own special and unforgettable way.”

In addition to David Paterson, he is survived by his wife of 61 years, Portia, another son, Daniel, and five grandchildren.