



## the village VOICE

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### **Gunning for the Working Families Party**

**Landlords, lawyers fire at will**

By Tom Robbins



In 1938, in the teeth of the Great Depression, the Roosevelt administration won passage of a 40-hour-week wage law. Employers were now obliged to pay their workers overtime. Shock and horror echoed across the nation's business establishments.

The mightiest oligarchs of the time—leaders of Republic Steel, Sun Oil, Kennecott Copper, Eli Lilly & Co.—combined to create something called the Committee for Constitutional Government, which began pouring cash into the coffers of candidates pledging to restore free enterprise, lower taxes on the wealthy, and tame organized labor.

History loves a do-over, and there's a small-bore version of this scenario playing out right now in New York. It began last spring, when the labor-backed Working Families Party scared the bejesus out of the propertied classes by providing much of the political heft behind the move to impose a new budget-

balancing tax on high-level earners. This coincided with a new Democratic majority in the State Senate. The traditionally Republican-dominated body had long served as a buffer to those pro-tenant, pro-labor crazies over in the Democratic-controlled Assembly. The WFP helped fire the cylinders in the engine of that takeover as well. In the City Council, where more than a dozen members owe their election to party support, the WFP is leading a charge to mandate one more stick in the eye of the affluent—paid sick coverage for employees.

The string of party successes rang alarm bells among monied interests around the state, who gathered in a confab to try and devise a counter-strategy. "There was a brainstorming session about what to do," says John Doyle, an executive of the Real Estate Board of New York, which convened the gathering. Present were representatives of business groups from Buffalo, Long Island, and the Hudson Valley. Also there to advise was Frank MacKay, the chairman of the state Independence Party, which has a habit of placing itself at the disposal of billionaires in search of a political rock to throw through a Democratic window.

Locally, the Independence Party is the for-hire vehicle successfully retained by Michael Bloomberg to give Republican-loathing Democrats a way to avoid sullyng their fingers on the GOP lever. Statewide, the Independence Party has been centered around its founder, upstate moneyman Tom Golisano, who was so aghast at the notion of a new "millionaire's tax" last year that he declared himself a resident of Florida, where millionaires are still accorded their proper respect. Golisano also fired up his political soldiers, including Roger Stone, the great Republican philosopher and free-love advocate. Stone has a tattoo of Richard Nixon on his back, which must have started quivering as he typed out an opening salvo naming the arch enemy as none other than the Working Families Party.

First to pick up this cudgel was Steve Spinola, who was hired by the city's largest landlords to run the Real Estate Board back in 1986 after several years in dress rehearsal as city development commissioner. Spinola helped round up some \$700,000 this fall in landlord donations in a mostly losing effort to stave off WFP-supported candidates in several Council races. On the eve of the Democratic runoff for comptroller and public advocate, Spinola issued a panicky memo to the "Real Estate Community" urging votes for David Yassky and Mark Green since they weren't backed by the Working Families Party (they lost). Spinola also made the ultimate sacrifice of enrolling as an Independence Party member. "I think Steve did it for the symbolism," explains Doyle. "So that people would understand that the page is turned and there is going to be a new approach."

Independence Party chairman MacKay is delighted to help Spinola and his landlord brethren turn that page. "We're proud to be the party of business," says MacKay, who started out as a heavy-metal rock critic before becoming a swami of third-party politics.

That's the political level of the blow-back against the WFP's success. Level Two is a legal assault now being waged in court in Staten Island. There, Rudy Giuliani's top attack dog, former city deputy mayor Randy Mastro, has filed suit alleging that the WFP swindled voters by low-balling the true costs of its efforts in the Council campaign of Debi Rose, who became that island's first African-American elected official this fall.

Plaintiffs in the case are five loyal supporters of Guy Molinari, the venerable GOP warhorse and former Staten Island borough president who has long been Giuliani's biggest booster. Like the rest of the Republican establishment, Molinari has a vested interest in any legal knee-capping of the WFP.

Trial begins this week, but so far the only evidence Mastro has offered is a pair of affidavits by his own former City Hall aide turned political consultant, Jake Menges. Back in Giuliani Time, Menges was best remembered for his charge across the Council chambers where he feigned throttling a black Councilman who had gone against the administration's wishes. Menges raged: "You can forget your fucking Beacon school," according to Jim Dwyer in the *Daily News*, who dubbed Menges a "baby hack."

In his first affidavit, Menges said Rose had "drastically underpaid" for work by the party's for-profit campaign arm, Data and Field Services. Rose should have paid "at least double" the \$19,000 she'd shelled out. When new filings showed Rose had done just that, paying some \$45,000 for the work, Menges moved the goal posts, stating in a new affidavit that even that amount was not "fair market value." While there's no such thing as a political consumer's shopping price list, Rose's campaign fees appear—based on public filings—to be somewhere at the upper end of what candidates doled out in this past election.

The party's tougher legal test is being conducted by the Manhattan U.S. attorney's office which last month subpoenaed financial records from the WFP and all of its city candidates. Nailing political party chieftains for corruption has been an Olympic-level prosecutorial sport for decades. Mug shots of Democratic party bosses Meade Esposito, Stanley Friedman, Clarence Norman, and Nassau GOP chief Joe Margiotta are just some of those gracing the scrapbooks. But this is the first time in memory that a local political party itself has been the target of a public corruption probe. Figuring out how money is handled by those wonderful "housekeeping" committees of all the major parties has always been a challenge, but they don't appear to have ever drawn the attention of the big game hunters at the U.S. attorney's office.

That's not to say that the WFP is a model of organizational clarity. Its cluttered third-floor offices on Nevins Street off Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn house the party, its for-profit campaign firm, and at least one nonprofit group. Downstairs is the community group, Acorn, which engages in some of the same political campaigns and whose leaders overlap with the party. Small wonder that when Edward Isaac Dovere, a reporter for the publication *City Hall*, wrote a series of articles voicing suspicions that things were badly amiss at the WFP, even many who never made it through the dense pieces assumed that so much smoke had to indicate fire lurking somewhere or other.

Actually, the WFP's biggest flaws are hardly indictable offenses. Its leaders tend to lapse into the arrogant lingo of the old-school bosses they seek to replace. They talk about taking political "scalps" just to show that they know how it's done; diligent legislators outside the inner circles of power are dismissed as "irrelevant." But then you have to figure that FDR's team—the one that changed America—suffered its own share of swollen egos.