

Public Employees in New York

January 10, 2015

Review of: Richard Steier, *Enough Blame to Go Around: The Labor Pains of New York City's Public Employees*. Albany, New York: Excelsior Editions/State University of New York Press, 2014. 304 pp. US\$24.95 (paperback).



Two things I know to be true about Richard Steier. He is the best full-time reporter on the New York City labor beat. He is also the only full-time reporter on the New York City labor beat.

That is no mean praise. Sure, *The New York Times'* Steve Greenhouse does yeoman work as its national labor reporter, and the city's union doings are covered sporadically by the dailies, but with the *Times* and the tabs, if it does not have a business angle or a political angle or a sports angle or an education angle or does not prefigure a strike that threatens to close the city down, it is not news.

It is to Steier, who thinks that what happens to working people on the job and in their unions is well worth knowing. It is Steier who knows union leaders and their industries, knows elected union officers sometimes act heroically, if rarely. It is Steier who unfailingly listens to what workers say. Like James Thurber's description of the good newshound, Steier "gets the story and writes the story." That skill and that sensitivity are amply on display in his *There's Enough Blame to Go Around: The Labor Pains of New York City's Public Employees Unions*. The book is a selection of his writing from 1996 to the present. With the exception of an introduction, conclusion, and section updates, all first appeared in his must-read and widely circulated weekly *The Chief*, which he edits. Know that the book is no simple cut-and-paste job, but shows the utility of covering closely the progression of stories over time.

And what stories! They have the quality of a Grand Guignol, as Steier captures a real-life demimonde inhabited by thieves and poseurs who prey on the poor, whether they be union leaders running the table and stealing the chairs or elected public officials who think smart budgeting means shilling for the city's already undertaxed corporate elite by instituting austerity programs whose savings come from either contract takebacks or employee layoffs. In the extreme case of former Mayor Rudy Giuliani, that meant layoffs only for workers whose locals failed to endorse him, something even Michael Bloomberg never tried.

That skill at showing who gains and who loses what came early in his career. It is from a piece that he refers to, but sadly does not appear in the book, in part because it deals with a private-sector strike and was not written for *The Chief*. Its provenance and the context in which it was written shaped for better or worse his subsequent career. Not only does it show what Steier could do, but what he still does.

On strike at the *New York Post* in 1993, he penned a guest op-ed indicting *Post* owner Digger Murdoch in the then extant *New York Newsday* for forcing the work stoppage. It was a column that effectively ended his daily journalism career, not to mention his position as the *Post's* city hall labor reporter. Here, he slammed the billionaire press baron Murdoch for moving "to emasculate a union

by stripping many veteran workers of their jobs and most of the money earmarked for retirement. . . . He has demanded a four month period during which he can fire editorial, advertising and circulation employees without regard to seniority and with no employee right to arbitration. Any union that agrees to these conditions might as well roll over and—well, it wouldn't have to play dead, because it would *be* dead."

With the severance offer a pittance, Steier wrote that "Murdoch's offer is like asking them to eat mud and pretend it's chocolate pudding."

I will say it again. Steier wrote this while on strike *himself*, and as an op-ed for a *competing* daily. Years later, he would call the editorial flacks at the *Post* and *News* corporate New York and city hall's "off-payroll publicists at the tabloids."

That truth telling is abundant in the new book, where he charts the history of labor union leaders, some of who start out as paladins and end up as tyrants.

There are precious few heroes in the book, and where there are, as when he speaks glowingly of teachers union President Randi Weingarten, the yardstick he uses is not necessarily that they are superlative leaders, but that they don't loot the union's treasury. His focus, like his paper, is on New York's municipal unions and those private employers such as school bus drivers.

With the exception of Robert Fitch's *Solidarity for Sale*, I do not know a treatment of labor in New York that uncovers so many toads from under so many rocks. His treatment of turbulent AFSCME District Council 37, New York's omnibus civil service union that, until outstripped by the United Federation of Teachers, was the city's largest public employees union, is required reading. From the autocratic Victor Gotbaum and the ineffectual, bordering-on- complicit Stanley Hill, to the trusteeship of Lee Saunders and the reconstituted machine of near-nonagenarian Lillian Roberts, leadership of the union by its executive directors (elected by delegates, not by membership poll) was shared by the satraps of the five largest unions. Even Saunders's efforts to clean out the corruption did not touch the central element behind the rot: the inability of the broad membership to vote the rascals out.

Steier charts the labor history of Giuliani, whose articulated vision of a smaller but better-paid work force shows him keeping only the first promise. Steier quotes Ed Koch's apt observation after District Council 37's endorsement of Giuliani for reelection in 1997 that "unions are engaged more in saving unions than saving the world." Or when Michael Bloomberg's minions fed the *New York Post* disinformation that the top five earning firefighters were going out with mammoth pensions. Mammoth they were, but not to those who actually fought the fires. The lucky few were but members of the fire commissioner's management team. Steier notes how "even prior to 9/11, better than 60 percent of the firefighting force was retiring on disability pensions., reflecting both the physical grind and the accumulation of toxins in their lungs from fighting fires and the build-up of diesel fuels from their trucks inside the firehouses."

Steier slams both Bloomberg and neoliberal State Governor Andrew Cuomo for blaming city and state deficits on workers' retirement plans as "riding a ballooning of pension payments over the past decade that is the result of abnormally poor stock market performance and a screw-the-future decision by a previous governor and mayor that depleted the retirement funds of the cushion for the time when the stock market would fizzle."

He describes Jim Butler, quondam leader of 7,500 housekeepers, janitors, dietary workers, and nurses' aides at the city-owned hospitals, for earning

\$285,000 while his workers were among the lowest paid in the city. It was not always thus. Butler, who coined the slogan "Fired Up, Can't Take No More" and who in his time was a model militant largely responsible for keeping Coney Island, Elmhurst, and Queens hospitals open as public facilities, ended his career before his ousting as a well-paid husk. This was once someone whom even his fierce opponent and eventual successor Carmen Charles could say that "Jim Butler is responsible for my being a labor leader. The first time I went to one of his union meetings, it lit a fire under me."

Asked by Steier what happened, Charles said she did not know. "He had a great vision. Sometimes people lose that vision."

One labor leader who started out as a shop floor militant in 1963, only to cuddle up to Giuliani was Charlie Hughes, whose members held non-pedagogical school titles with the Board of Education. Hughes, president of the largest of the Council's "Big Five" unions, would by 2000 receive a lengthy prison sentence for stealing two million dollars in dues from the local's treasury. Unlike Butler, who despised Giuliani, Hughes hosted a reelection party for the mayor at his Queens Village home in 1997. The endorsement was payback for the mayor's allowing Hughes to represent the thousands of school aides hired after the teachers' contract freed teachers from lunchroom duties.

As much dirt as is mucked here, Steier is no weasel-like Walter Winchell (and he certainly does not write in staccato Winchellese) or a sort like Drew Pearson who assumed union leaders were by nature corrupt or venal. He assumes nothing except that the corrupt do not make for charming stories when they betray of their own members.

He certainly knows that there is skullduggery on the part of union leaders, as with electrical workers and onetime Central Labor Council Leader and Queens Assemblyman Brian McLaughlin, who is now serving prison time for stealing upwards of three million dollars from numerous labor and charitable institutions (including a Little League team he coached). Steier calls the McLaughlin saga "No Bribe Left Behind."

His tale of Transit Union leader Roger Toussaint reads like a greek tragedy where hubris wins out over decent aspirations. Coming into office at the head of the Transportation Workers Local 100's long-standing opposition caucus (how Toussaint came to lead that ticket is not told), Steier paints a portrait of a leader degraded into a tin-pot. Early in his presidency, when new mayor Michael Bloomberg boldly and unceremoniously inserted himself into the union's 2005 negotiations with the Metropolitan Transit Authority, the state body that runs the city subways, buses, and much of the suburban rail lines, Toussaint was widely reported as telling the mayor to zip it. "With a single impolite suggestion that the mayor hold his tongue, Toussaint propelled himself forward as the tough guy in the city needed at a time when union leaders had been known for a series of corruption scandals," Steier writes.

The soon-to-be-settled contract, with modest raises but strong language aimed at quashing management abuses, was singular in being won by a new, Trinidad-born union leader with no bargaining experience. Yet the ratification margin of victory, just 60 percent, was treated by Toussaint less as a victory than as an insult, and Steier insists the transition from working class hero to paranoid schemer gestated here.

Typically, Steier's profiles of Toussaint, which in many ways were more congratulatory than those he made for others, came with a price. Toussaint cut off Steier and *The Chief's* reporters from any public comment, which only made Steier and his staff dig harder.

If there is a weakness in the book, it is typified by the Toussaint section, which goes long on Toussaint's personal faults—his firing even allies at a moment's notice for the mildest expressions of independent thinking was just part of the problem—and short in surveying the structured relations any union president would have with the moribund Metropolitan Transit Authority and a politically divided union. What the book could use is an analytical framework for understanding why union officials so frequently turn from being leaders and fighters to Judas goats and management enablers; from working class heroes to thieves, petty tyrants, or both.

Saying that, Steier's work takes guts, not just in the timely writing but in the republishing of what could be dismissed as old news; at least old to city-based labor activists and those reading Steier religiously. Legendary *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Herb Caen famously bragged that he never read his old columns. How many scribblers can stand by their work a week after publication, let alone years or decades? Steier can. His is still instructive.

So if journalism is the first draft of history, the book's descriptive power alone means Steier does not need to work on a second draft.

Michael Hirsch is a New Politics board member. This article first appeared in *Working USA*, Sept. 2014.