

# **Republicans and Labor: Is a New Alliance Possible?**

by Jerry F. Cammarata

Late in the last century Edwin Abbott, a theologian, scholar of classical literature and Shakespeare buff, wrote a short book that has become something of a minor classic. The book, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, was a satire of the manners and prejudices of British society in the Victorian era.

The "flatland" of the book is a geometric plane, and all of the characters are two-dimensional figures who see each other only as lines.

The inhabitants of this little universe are not merely unable to see themselves from the point of view offered by a third dimension: they are incapable of imagining what sort of thing a third dimension could be.

*Flatland* proved to be prophetic when, just a few years later, an unkempt little patent clerk began to toy with the idea that these three dimensions, with which you and I and Isaac Newton have been so comfortable, might just be as incomplete as the two dimensions of *Flatland*. In fact the little gent with the

feral hair, Albert Einstein, went so far as to say that even our visualization of the three dimensions we thought we knew is all wrong. Dimensions are not static structures, like the lines on stacks of graph paper, but are fluid and changing.

*Flatland* was about a social revolution, and Einstein's theories of relativity brought a scientific revolution. It is now

time for a less momentous revolution in American politics. It is time organized labor and the Republican Party realized that they really are on the same side.

Generations of workers and politicians have grown up with the unchallenged, almost subconscious, notion that labor and conservatism are incompatible: labor is "progressive," while the Republican Party

is "reactionary"; labor is "socialistic" while Republicans protect "free enterprise"; labor cares for people, but Republicans care for corporations; labor is greedy and lazy, while Republicans are greedy but industrious.

While some of these prejudiced characterizations may have been born of real incidents or attitudes held by

**It's time for the Republican Party and organized labor to realize that they're on the same side.**

some, the truth is that the framework of the American economy has changed so much over the years, and the structures of American politics have been so altered, that such stereotypes are as obsolete now as bows and arrows are in the nuclear age. Both the conservative and the labor movements have changed, in large measure because the problems and concerns faced by their constituents have changed, and it is time both groups stretched their imaginations enough to realize how much they need each other, and how much they have in common.

Concerns of labor leaders have shifted, from securing better safety conditions in factories to winning services that help families stay together; from raising entry-level wages for unskilled workers to retraining employed workers so that American companies can stay competitive in a world market of industries that are constantly reinventing themselves.

Traditional Republican interests – competitiveness, incentive, family stability – have thus become the issues of the new resurgence of labor. Concerns of labor – affordable housing, public education, public accountability – are increasingly becoming the top worries of management and shareholders.

### **Vigorous Advocate**

Those skeptical about the logic of a Republican-union alliance should first note that such a liaison is by no means unprecedented. There was no stauncher Republican than Theodore Roosevelt. A vigorous advocate of a strong national defense, a believer in free enterprise, and one who would feel right at home with the moral crusades so many conservatives are waging today, Roosevelt was also the man who reformed child labor laws, who insisted upon safe work places for miners, who founded the Food and Drug Administration to protect the average consumer, who founded the nation's conservationist programs, and who took on the greedy interests of Wall Street when powerful financiers turned the American Free enterprise system into a sort of privatized socialism and exploited both workers and consumers through a cabal of economic control.

It is also not entirely unheard of for

unions and Republicans to end up on the same side of a controversy today. There are many examples, even in the industrial Northeast where unionism has had its hardest edge.

Republicans have long recognized that the greatest engine for economic expansion is an educated workforce. Business leaders in major cities have been complaining for years that their greatest disappointment is not high taxes – though that is certainly a problem – but a dearth of qualified applicants for entry-level jobs. Young people, high school and even college graduates who cannot read training manuals or write inter-office memoranda are not going to be able to contribute to a corporation's success, and a consistent lack of able candidates for jobs will make a company move to the next town as surely as any burdensome tax.

On the other hand, major labor organizations have been complaining for years about inattention to the nation's public schools. They have rightly pointed out that politicians at all levels of government have denounced school failures in stentorian tones, but done nothing to provide leadership for real reform. The recent initiatives by the AFL-CIO include a renewed emphasis on labor's advocacy for better schools.

So, Republicans and labor leaders have been attacking the same problem, for essentially the same reasons, with no coordination between their efforts. They should be natural allies.

### **Long history**

Labor, of course, has a long history of championing the cause of better housing. Indeed, the very use of the term "housing issues" connotes a decidedly liberal agenda. However, Republicans in cities know that corporations are abandoning urban centers because they cannot recruit staff who can afford to live within commuting distance. The problems raised by gentrification, by the division of city economic classes into the very poor and very rich, by deterioration of urban housing stock and the reduction of available dwelling space, things some would assume are at the top of a liberal agenda, are now the problems that traditionally Republican business leaders are trying to wrestle to

the ground.

What about all the talk of "family values"? Labor fought for the Family and Medical Leave Act, the Earned Income Credit for working families with children, and a higher tax credit for parents. Republicans have advocated a tax credit for adoption and are pushing in some places for the elimination of sales taxes on clothing to make it easier for working parents to keep those ever-growing feet be-sneakered.

Of course, the clearest example of where unions and Republicans are actually helping each other, albeit without admitting it much of the time, is in the reform of welfare. It took Republican pushing to make workfare a national initiative. After GOP governors proved it could work in their states by encouraging those on relief to seek employment, they have created a whole new pool for membership in unions. In effect, Republicans are swelling the ranks of some of the most active and vociferous unions. On the other hand, workfare could not be successful without the cooperation of many of the local leaders of unions, and without the mentoring provided by union members.

It should be becoming increasingly clear to both labor leaders and Republicans that old antagonisms make no sense today, that eternal conflict is counterproductive and that both groups are looking to the same goals.

In coming years, as the nature of the workplace and the role of government continue to evolve, unions and Republicans will have to address new challenges with a freshness born of insight. If both sides continue to encase their imaginations in the two-dimensional framework of a civic *Flatland*, or even the three-dimensional world of a republic governed by Newton's laws, they will do themselves and their children no favors. Only by embracing the altered consciousness of a political relativity will they be able to bequeath the next generation the stars of a new constellation.

---

*Jerry Cammarata is a member of the New York City Central Board of Education, and the Richmond County Republican Party as well as a former Republican candidate for the New York State Assembly.*

# CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS

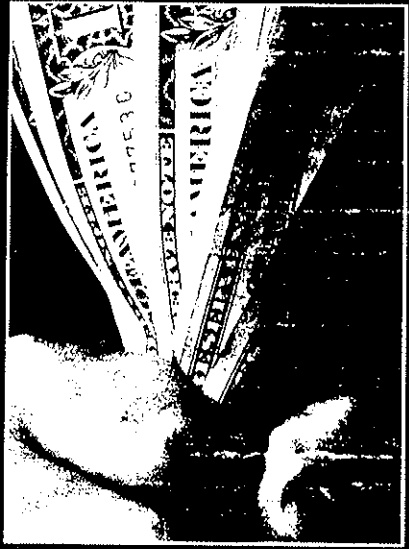
THE MAGAZINE FOR PEOPLE IN POLITICS



Life of the Parties:  
Hammond, Alper

Political Fundraising  
Buyer's Guide

Clear Cut in Maine



# TAKE THE MONEY AND RUN

Cathy Allen on the secrets of asking for cash  
Nancy Bocskor explains home style fundraising  
PLUS: A surefire technique to raise big bucks fast!

Upset for Delaware State Rep  
Managing Volunteers  
Labor and the GOP  
Vertical Plane Politics

Compliments of Jerry Cammarata



Last Chance to Register - 15th  
Annual National Campaign  
Training Seminar &  
Trade Show  
See Page 14