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Razzle Dazzle

A de Blasio Union Critic Not Ready to Jump Ship

By RICHARD STEIER February 13, 2017 (17 hrs ago)



The Chief-Leader/Michel Friang

'NOT A BAD GUY; A BAD MANAGER': Teamsters Local 237 President Greg Floyd laid out an extensive case against endorsing Blasio for re-election, ranging from micromanaging to neglecting issues that while important don't carry that much political value, as well as catering to key campaign contributors. But with no challengers emerging yet who are considered to be serious threats to his gaining a second term, Mr. Floyd said, 'I still haven't committed to backing someone else, or to endorsing the Mayor.'

When Mayor de Blasio picked the Queensbridge Houses Feb. 3 to announce a gun-violence initiative because that once-notorious Housing Authority development had completed 13 months without a murder, Greg Floyd wasn't among the interested parties regarding it as a deserved victory lap.

"I wouldn't beat my chest and say this is a shining moment," the Teamsters Local 237 president said during an interview in his Manhattan office four days later. "I would say we need more of these shining moments."

Mr. Floyd represents roughly 8,000 HA employees in his 24,000-member union. He said that there were 900 fewer cops detailed to the 328 developments than were assigned prior to the 1995 merger in which the NYPD absorbed the formerly independent Housing and Transit Police Departments. This was confirmed by the NYPD, with a spokesperson listing the headcount at 1,793, even though an infusion of officers in mid-2014 at the Housing Bureau to deal with a rash of shootings during Mr. de Blasio's first year in office had brought staffing back to the pre-merger figure of 2,700.

And, Mr. Floyd added, the size of the Housing force was further depleted anytime the NYPD created special details, "like Trump" or for parade or protest duty.
Short on Patrol Cars? Take the Bus

"There was a shortage of patrol cars, so they were told to take the bus in emergencies," he said of Housing officers. "Or scooters, which are only good for four hours before you have to charge them again."

What makes this particularly hard to understand is that while the city in 2016 experienced a 4-percent drop in felony crime, in the HA it was up by 2.5 percent. (For the opening month of this year, crime in the projects dropped 1.9 percent.) And Mr. Floyd is skeptical about the NYPD's stats for the HA: while agreeing that homicide numbers aren't easily manipulated because "you can't hide the bodies," he said, "I know they're under-reporting crimes like assaults, robberies."

His guess as to why the Housing Bureau has lost one-third of its uniformed staff even as project crime defied the citywide trend was, "Politically, people in the Housing Authority just don't get a lot of attention." And, he added, the de Blasio administration seemed to be increasingly relying on outside help, including the deployment of ex-cons with violent pasts who live in the neighborhoods where the more-troubled projects are located, to assist in resolving tensions among gang members.

"How many community groups do they have in the projects to keep the violence down?" he asked. While some massive busts of gangs in recent years might be expected to alleviate the problem, Mr. Floyd believes that when one group is taken off the street, others move in to fill the vacuum.

Police staffing is hardly the only area where he is at odds with the Mayor, although his remarks last week were actually a bit milder than a critique he offered shortly after the November elections. At that time, he questioned as premature Mr. de Blasio's quickly taking a strong position against President-elect Trump while also suggesting that announcing the city would not cooperate with the new administration's attempts to deport undocumented workers meant the Feds would get an early start and "find them themselves."

Not Helping ‘His Voters’

Mr. Floyd is now questioning the judgment of many working-class voters who backed the new President, saying, “He wasn’t prepared to win and the rollout of his administration certainly showed that...We’re back to talking about Muslims, we’re back to talking about a wall. We’re alienating Germany and Britain and Australia. We’re praising Putin. Your [nominee for] Labor Secretary is talking about bringing in robots and opposing higher wages—I don’t see how that’s helped the people who voted for you. So now we want to see how his Cabinet performs,” although he’s hardly reassured by the talk buzzing about in Washington about legislation to expand right-to-work laws on a national basis.

And the Local 237 leader is astonished at the continued focus by the new administration on expanding gun-owner rights.

“We want to take away the ban on mentally-ill people buying weapons?” he asked. “If Greg Floyd wants to buy 10 assault rifles and .50-caliber ammunition, somebody should be at my door asking why. People who are on terror watch-lists should not be allowed to buy guns.”

The kinship he shares with the Mayor on these issues has not, however, left him more inclined to join the growing number of civilian-union leaders making early endorsements of his re-election.

A big part of his hesitance concerns the “serious investigations” by law-enforcement agencies including the Manhattan District Attorney and U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara concerning mayoral fund-raising. Until those begin to be resolved, Mr. Floyd said, “you just don’t rubber-stamp somebody.”

No Viable Options?

Among major municipal union leaders, only Pat Lynch representing Police Officers and Ed Mullins representing Sergeants have been more critical of Mr. de Blasio. But Mr. Floyd—who backed ex-City Comptroller Bill Thompson in the 2013 Democratic mayoral primary before going with the winner in the general election—said he hasn’t gone out looking for a potential challenger, and none has yet emerged who would pose a serious threat unless corruption indictments of key mayoral aides created new political vulnerability for the incumbent.

“We have a better working relationship today” than in the past, he said of the Mayor, noting that the installation of better lighting and other security measures in HA projects had helped.

“I don’t think he’s a bad guy,” he said of Mr. de Blasio. “I think he’s a bad manager.”

He believes the Mayor alternates between “micromanaging” on some issues of obvious political importance to him while neglecting others that may be equally important but are less likely to galvanize voters.

In particular, he pointed to the spate of recent child murders in families whose previous conduct had put them on the radar of the Administration for Children’s Services, and the continued growth of homelessness.

“It took the Mayor two years to acknowledge that there was a homeless problem,” Mr. Floyd said. When it was noted that homelessness also rose under his predecessor yet attracted little media attention, he responded, “When Bloomberg was the Mayor, we weren’t stepping over 20 people on 14th Street,” where the union’s headquarters is located.

‘Has He Spent Wisely?’

“It’s not that he hasn’t spent the money on this problem,” he said of Mr. de Blasio. “It’s, has he spent the money wisely?”

He said the city should consider giving priority to homeless families as HA apartments become vacant, although that could come at the expense of people who already have homes but are on waiting lists for the projects. Mr. Floyd also believes the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development should be acquiring more properties that could be converted into either housing or less-costly shelters.

“The shelters have become an extension of Rikers Island—half criminals, half homeless people,” said the union leader, who also represents security staff in the shelters. “There has to be [transitional housing] for ex-inmates.”

Another complication is the rise in the mentally ill living on the streets, which he said had its origin in the closing of mental-health institutions dating back to George Pataki’s time as Governor and has continued through Andrew Cuomo’s tenure. Referring to two of those facilities that either discontinued or scaled back their operations under the state’s deinstitutionalization policy, Mr. Floyd asked, “Why don’t you take places like Creedmoor and Pilgrim State and build housing on them?”

‘Dust Off Bloomberg’

Instead, he said, Mr. de Blasio’s efforts to combat homelessness have come down to “you dust off Mayor Bloomberg’s plan to build affordable housing on New York City Housing Authority property where you’re taking away playgrounds and parking and other space that’s needed by residents.”

And the properties where such moves seem to be getting the greatest consideration, he continued, are in locations in Manhattan that are especially coveted by developers who believe that by agreeing to earmark maybe 20 percent of new units for affordable housing, they could reap a fortune charging market rates for the remainder.

“You look at Long Island College Hospital and you look at Rivington—all of it’s the same,” he said, referring to longtime health-care facilities in downtown Brooklyn and the lower East Side whose continuation in that role was publicly supported by the Mayor, yet the sites ultimately were sold for development as luxury housing. The Rivington House transaction is the subject of multiple investigations, including a scathing report by Mr. de Blasio’s own Department of Investigation. “They give the developers what they want.

“I’m disappointed in that aspect,” Mr. Floyd continued. “There’s so many vacant lots that the city owned” that could be converted to combat the homeless problem.

School-Safety Clashes

While he believes the Mayor has gone against his ideological professions to accommodate real-estate interests that contribute to his campaigns, he also is convinced that his efforts to remove metal detectors from many public schools—Local 237 represents the School Safety Agents who provide security in the system—to appease civil-liberties groups that believe they create an oppressive climate for students.

The metal detectors are deployed primarily in schools where past weapon use created concerns about dangers that should be of greater consequence than the annoyance and delays students endure by going through the machines—which, it should be noted, are used in most government buildings, including the courts, as well as at airports and sports arenas.

And Mr. de Blasio has good reason to be familiar with the genesis of metal detectors in schools, since he was working for Mayor David Dinkins 24 years ago this month on the day when a planned trip to Thomas Jefferson High School led to a rude greeting when the Mayor arrived to discover that two students had been shot to death by a pupil who said he obtained the gun to defend himself against their bullying. Jefferson, located in Brownsville close by East New York—then and now two of the city's most crime-ridden neighborhoods—was the kind of school where the detectors seemed particularly necessary.

Last fall, the Department of Education was poised to remove them from a significant number of schools, prompting Mr. Floyd to warn of the potentially tragic consequences of doing so. Asked last week about the impact, he said, “We have not heard any more news since we complained about the Mayor’s plan to remove metal detectors.”

(Coincidentally, it was around that time last fall that the Correction Department had second thoughts about ending solitary confinement for all inmates 21 and younger and instituted a practice that has drawn roughly the same criticism from jail reformers: having miscreant younger inmates shackled to desks for hours at a time to limit the damage they can do.)

Stun Guns a Hot Item

Mr. Floyd noted that in the school year that ended last June 30, School Safety Agents confiscated 117 stun guns/Tasers, with 22 seized in the first half of the current school year.

“The Mayor is doing a great job of covering up the weapons that are being brought into schools,” he said, noting that the union no longer has accurate crime stats because of members’ “fear of retaliation by the Police Department” after then-Police Commissioner Bill Bratton ordered the SSAs to stop providing them, saying, “unions put you in jeopardy.”

And yet, Mr. Floyd added, police officers “post their arrests on Facebook all the time” without being penalized.

He has clashed with the Mayor over DOE’s decision to ease back on suspensions after the New York Civil Liberties Union found that a disproportionate percentage of them were given to black and Latino students, even when accounting for the fact that they also made up the majority of students in the system.

Regarding the part of the report that found those students were being given harsher punishments than whites or Asians who committed the same offenses, Mr. Floyd agreed that this should-n't happen. But he noted that 70 percent of the SSAs are women of color (about 75 percent of his overall membership is black or Latino) and had no reason to be biased against pupils who came from the same backgrounds. The fact that two groups accounted for a greater number of the serious offenses than their percentage of the school population might be best explained, he said, by taking a "look at the percentage of black and Hispanic children that belong to gangs."

Poverty, Family Issues

He continued, "Poverty plays a part," as do matters like parental involvement and problems that parents are having or creating in the students' homes.

Whatever the cause, he said, relaxing suspensions "has had an adverse effect" that outweighed the value of keeping students in school so as not to interrupt the learning process for them, because they wound up disrupting it for their classmates unless some check was placed on their behavior. Mr. Floyd claimed some NYPD officials, who are the bosses of the SSAs, had tried to persuade him not to be so outspoken about the changes recently implemented or contemplated.

But, he said, "If I stayed silent and went along with it, those metal detectors would have come out. If I remain silent, I become a part of this," referring to the greater leniency that he believes will have a negative impact on school discipline.

Cards No Deterrent

The recent move to giving out warning cards in lieu of suspensions might make sense in instances where a student was caught with a marijuana joint, Mr. Floyd said, but not when that penalty was administered to one carrying "seven bags of marijuana [or] knives." Since students weren't required to inform their parents of the warning cards, they offered no practical check on their behavior.

Instead, he said, "You could have mandatory classes to bring them in and speak to them about their behavior after school, with their parents there."

Sometimes, Mr. Floyd said, problems get solved by having parents come to school for private discussions about less-serious issues. He cited one classmate he had who always refused to read when instructed to do so by the Teacher, and when the parent was called in, with no other students present in the classroom, the child admitted having difficulty seeing the words on the page, leading to a prescription for glasses.

"The child wasn't defiant; the child just couldn't read the page," but feared admitting that in the middle of class because of concern about being teased by other pupils, Mr. Floyd recalled.

Getting beneath the surface, he said, also helped resolve an epidemic of repairs not made in Housing Authority apartments that built up over several years. One reason the agency cited for the backlog was that Local 237 members doing maintenance work had hours that made it difficult for working tenants to be present when staff was available to let them into their apartments.

Wasn't Just the Hours

It attempted to implement staggered shifts under which some employees would begin work a couple of hours earlier while others would start later and finish their tours during a period after which tenants would have arrived home. But Mr. Floyd argued that the agency and the city were obligated to negotiate with him on changes in hours, which delayed them until an agreement was reached last April paying bonuses and differentials to maintenance personnel who volunteered to work staggered shifts that had some starting work as early as 6:30 a.m. and others finishing up as late as 8 p.m.

Along the way, Mr. Floyd said, he pointed out to HA management another reason for the delays in making apartment repairs. The backlog had led HA officials to schedule appointments as much as a year in advance, but nobody followed up by calling tenants a day or two before the repair date to make sure that they would be home to let maintenance workers enter their apartments. Those calls are now a part of the process.

He is convinced that a desire by the Mayor to get the repairs done more quickly and on his terms accounted for what he described as “heavy-handed tactics by his Labor Commissioner in holding up our contract for a year trying to get the [HA maintenance] hours changed when all we wanted was the [citywide contract] pattern” of 10-percent raises over a seven-year period.

Timing Doesn't Fit

Labor Commissioner Bob Linn challenged that claim, noting that the contract deal was concluded in May 2015, more than 11 months prior to the reaching of the HA maintenance accord.

Pointing out that this was just a year after the United Federation of Teachers contract deal that established the wage pattern, Mr. Linn said in a Feb. 8 phone interview, “There were issues specific to the Housing Authority that we were trying to work on” that required more time than simply applying the economic terms of the UFT package.

Ultimately, though, pay talks happen to be one of the areas where Mr. Floyd gives the Mayor high marks, saying, “I think he’s done a pretty good job in getting contracts settled,” particularly given the complications created when Mr. Bloomberg allowed all union deals to expire during his final four years in office without a serious attempt to reach agreement on new ones.

The Local 237 pact will expire in March 2018, prompting the thought that Mr. Floyd would be inclined to see how the November election turned out before looking for a new deal.

That’s not necessarily so, he said, explaining, “If the Mayor’s willing to give us an offer that’s a good offer, we’re willing to take a look at it.”