

**N**ew York may have the highest labor enrollment of any state in the nation, but that does not make being a labor leader any easier these days. The movement is on the decline nationally. The economy still has not fully recovered and the city faces a multibillion-dollar deficit.

But with the strong leadership of people in the city's labor movement, New York remains a union town.

For the May Power Matrix, City Hall, with the input of political consultants and longtime observers of the movement, compiled a list of 12 of the most effective

# THE POWER MATRIX

## NEW YORK CITY'S

# 12

## MOST EFFECTIVE LABOR LEADERS

labor leaders in the city, a tough task given the slew of qualified candidates. Some come from the city's largest unions, while others have a small membership but have had an outsized impact. Some are known for negotiating contracts with the city, while others are known for their political skills. Only heads of unions (not political directors or other staff positions) were considered.

The common theme: these are the leaders who deliver the most for their members in city government and politics.

By Chris Bragg

Photos by Andrew Schwartz



## JACK AHERN

**International Union of Operating Engineers Local 30  
Central Labor Council**

**Number of members:** 4,000

**Represent:** Mechanical and engineering workers

**Time on job:** Business manager and financial secretary of Engineers since 1996, president of CLC since 2008

**Notable accomplishment:** As president of the CLC, Ahern was instrumental in hashing out living-wage agreements for workers at city-subsidized projects in Greenpoint/Williamsburg, Coney Island and Willets Point.

During his tenure running the 400-member CLC umbrella union organization, Ahern has helped broker deals with the city to ensure living wages would be paid in several major city-subsidized construction projects, a fight he continues with the recent introduction in the City Council of a bill requiring the pay of prevailing wages at taxpayer-funded projects.

He is also frequently on the phone with Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Council Speaker Christine Quinn, working behind the scenes as the central voice of the labor movement.

Observers say Ahern's position as head of the CLC, meanwhile, has also given increased clout to the Operating Engineers, the union of equipment mechanics that he heads, despite its relatively small size.

Now, Ahern is leading the charge to make Wall Street pay back taxpayers for the money it lost through alleged financial misdeeds, including proposals for a bonus tax and a stock-transfer tax—ideas, he said, that would serve all working men and women.

"One of the abilities you have to have in this job is to be able to see beyond your own personal gain, to see what issues are for the good of the city," Ahern said.



## GARY LABARBERA

**Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York**

**Number of members:** 100,000

**Represent:** Construction workers

**Time on job:** President since 2009

**Notable accomplishment:** Negotiated a project labor agreement with both the Bloomberg administration and private contractors that saved tens of thousands of his members' jobs.

When Gary LaBarbera assumed duties as the new head of the Building Trades Council in early 2009, the construction industry was in the midst of a collapse. Lending had halted. Funds for city projects had dried up.

LaBarbera first set about reaching a new project labor agreement with the Building Trades' Employers Association, an alliance of 17,000 city contractors. After six months, they reached a deal revising normal work rules that saved some 20,000 of his members' jobs.

At the same time, LaBarbera was also negotiating a first-ever such agreement with the city that took about 10 months to hash out and involved five different city agencies. (He recalls that the deal was so far-reaching and complex that 40 or 50 people from the union and city would be huddled in a room trying to hammer out the details.) In the end, the city saved some \$340 million, while 35,000 jobs in LaBarbera's union were spared.

"This if the first time anything like this has ever been done with the city of New York," he said. "We're very, very proud. It's a win-win for everybody."

LaBarbera is also known for being the first full-time head of the Central Labor Council following Brian McLaughlin's 2006 arrest on charges of embezzling more than \$2 million. LaBarbera said his focus had been to clean up the BCTC's operations and make it more transparent and democratic.

"In my mind, I was able to execute those things," he said. "I think I was able to bring stability and create a stable environment."





## MIKE FISHMAN

SEIU Local 32 BJ

**Number of members:** 70,000 in New York City (120,000 nationwide)

**Represent:** Property service workers

**Time on job:** President since 1999

**Notable accomplishment:** Recently avoided a strike and struck a last-minute deal with the Realty Advisory Board on a new contract giving city doormen a 10-percent raise over the next four years while increasing employer contributions toward health benefits and pensions by nearly 20 percent.

In the decade that Mike Fishman has been president of 32 BJ, the union has become a multi-state powerhouse, growing from 45,000 members to 120,000 through aggressive organizing campaigns and consolidations with other unions in the city.

As the union's power has grown, Fishman said, he has been careful to keep the agenda member-focused. For instance, among the 30,000 doormen who recently got a new contract with the Realty Advisory Board, some 2,000 member representatives were actively engaged in determining the top five issues they wanted negotiated before going to the bargaining table.

Fishman said going through this process gives both his members and business interests at the other side of the table a clear idea of where they stand.

"I believe at the very least we need to be completely united behind those most important issues," he said. "Or else, we're going to be united in being on strike."

Fishman is also seen as taking a less ideologically driven approach than some union leaders, pragmatically reaching out to the Bloomberg administration and property owners to find common ground. Though he is wrestling with the administration on a bill that would require a living wage to be paid to his workers on city-subsidized development, for instance, the union has also worked closely on the administration's goal of creating green buildings in the city. An increasingly powerful player within the Working Families Party, the union still sometimes goes its own way, as when it backed Bloomberg for re-election last year.

## WILFREDO LARANCUENT

Laundry, Dry Cleaning and Allied Workers Joint Board

**Number of members:** 5,000

**Represent:** Laundry workers

**Time on job:** Manager since 2000

**Notable accomplishment:** As a member of the executive board of the Working Families Party, Larancuent was a key player in the party's electoral success in 2009.

Though the laundry workers' union is fairly small, observers say that Wilfredo Larancuent's influence in the city's labor movement has been outsized in recent years.

He has been very active within the Working Families Party as an executive board member, pushing an agenda focusing on increased affordable housing and affordable transportation. He is also leading the reorganization of ACORN into New York Community For Change, as the organization looks to refashion itself following a period of upheaval.

And on the national level, Larancuent has also been a major player. In 2009, as vice-president of UNITE HERE, Larancuent helped lead the charge to



split off 100,000 workers from the union into a new group, WORKERS UNITED, that he said would focus more on the needs of low-income workers.

Larancuent, whose own union consists of about 80-percent recent immigrants, said he had a unique perspective on the needs of his workers as an immigrant from the Dominican Republic himself. Larancuent said the key to his organizing approach was empowering workers to do the same job he does.

"The way you apply pressure is train people to organize," he said. "You want people going out and doing these things themselves."

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## PETER WARD

New York Hotel Trades Council

**Number of members:** 30,000

**Represent:** Hotel Workers

**Time on job:** President since 1996

**Notable accomplishment:** The union's political operation has backed the winning candidate for all three citywide offices and in nine out of 10 Council race in 2009.

Five years ago, Peter Ward said he had a revelation. The union had long had an active membership, and had given a lot of money to political candidates. But he realized that in order to secure the futures of his mostly low-income membership, they needed to be the union directly

responsible for getting politicians elected.

Now, under the watch of political director Neil Kwatra, the union's political operation trains members on issues and in political organizing, so that when they knock on doors or phone-bank, they can speak credibly on behalf of the candidates they are supporting.

"Our members don't just show up and wear a T-shirt," Ward said. "They're there 100 days before an election."

Ward said that this is all necessary because of changes in the hotel industry in the past decade: a new wave of non-unionized hotels that sprung up during the development boom. In recent years, though, the union's political power has helped ensure that new hotels at Willets Point, Aqueduct Racetrack and Coney Island are unionized. On the state level, Gov. David Paterson signed an executive order last year easing unionizing at state-funded developments.

Ward said these developments were a result of the new political strategy paying off.

"Our members have extraordinary needs," Ward said. "What I came to understand over the past five years is that giving money alone was not enough."





## HARRY NESPOLI

**Uniformed Sanitationmen's Association  
Municipal Labor Committee**

**Number of members:** 6,100

**Represent:** Sanitation workers

**Time on job:** President since 2003

**Notable accomplishment:** In 2007, struck a 54-month contract with the city, including a nearly 20-percent increase in wages and benefits.

As head of the Municipal Labor Committee, an umbrella organization for the city's public-sector unions, Harry Nespoli has a front-and-center view as member unions hash out contracts with the Bloomberg administration, and has led negotiations with the city on wage increases. (Other aspects of contracts, such as benefits, are negotiated separately.)

For all of the wrangling back-and-forth with the city, though, Nespoli said he believes Bloomberg's fiscal prudence has kept the city in better shape than anyone else could have.

"He's one of the best mayors we've ever had at managing the city and its money," said Nespoli, whose own union endorsed Bloomberg for re-election.



Nespoli said that Bloomberg has also had a creative attitude in dealing with his union, allowing its members to take Martin Luther King Day off, for instance, in exchange for other concessions.

Nespoli said the administration, meanwhile, had plenty of reasons to feel thankful toward his members: efficiency improvements implemented by his members in recent years have saved the city some \$2.5 billion, he said.

As for his job leading the Municipal Labor Committee, Nespoli said it is all about juggling competing priorities.

"It's very difficult being the chair," he said. "You try to reach a resolution with everyone and sit down with everyone, but everyone has a different opinion."



## MIKE MULGREW

**United Federation of Teachers**

**Number of members:** 163,000

**Represent:** Public- (and some charter-) school teachers

**Time on job:** President since July 2009.

**Notable accomplishment:** Only months after his appointment as president, Mulgrew won election with 91 percent of the vote.

Mike Mulgrew kept a low profile for his first few months after being appointed to succeed Randi Weingarten. Then, he was seemingly everywhere, taking a more confrontational tact than had Weingarten on a range of issues, including filing a lawsuit against the city in an attempt to stop a slew of school closures.

"The first two months, people were saying, 'You're being too quiet,'" Mulgrew said. "The second two months, they said, 'You're being too loud.'"

Whatever the perception, the approach appears to have worked: Mulgrew recently won election by a historically huge margin. He attributes the big win in part to the outspoken opposition to his performance by



a certain anti-teachers-union tabloid newspaper.

"The *New York Post* certainly hasn't hurt," Mulgrew said.

Since his re-election, Mulgrew has reached accords with the Bloomberg administration on eliminating rubber rooms and using test data to determine teacher tenure, which could bolster the state's efforts to win federal Race to the Top money.

Mulgrew's influence was tested, though, as the UFT-friendly Assembly Democrats tried to hash out a compromise with a State Senate bill to lift the charter-school cap. Another major issue facing the union is the city's cuts of thousands of teaching jobs in this year's budget.

Mulgrew said he would continue to compromise when it made sense, but not to back down when compromise would hurt the interests of his members—or their students.

"My job is to represent the people of the union and all of the people in our communities to make sure they have good lives," he said. "If someone is doing something that hurts the schools, I will stand up to that."





## NORMAN SEABROOK

**Correction Officers Benevolent Association**

**Number of members:** 9,000

**Represent:** City jail guards

**Time on job:** President since 1995

**Notable accomplishment:** Led a successful effort for the city and state to pass an anti-privatization bill, which prevented the city from eliminating thousands of jobs for correction officers.

People in the labor movement say Norman Seabrook is sort of like the Chuck Schumer of union leaders: never get between him and a television camera.

But Seabrook said the results he has achieved speak even more forcefully than he does.

"A number of people are critical of the way I talk, are critical of my swagger," Seabrook said. "But they can't make me change what I do, because I'm doing what's best for my members."

Unlike cops or firefighters, jail guards are not visible to the public, so Seabrook has to keep a high profile in order to get his members their due, he said.

Seabrook has achieved a number of legislative successes, he said, by working across the aisle with both Democrats and Republicans. Seabrook was appointed by former President George W. Bush to a task force looking into how to make the postal service more efficient, and was appointed to the MTA board by Republican former Gov. George Pataki, where he has emphasized national security issues.

And yet, Seabrook's union was the first outside Illinois to endorse Barack Obama for president.

"People said I was out of my fucking mind," he said. "But I don't endorse based on what I hope to receive. I support the person."

## STUART APPELBAUM

**Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union**

**Number of members:** 40,000 (100,000 in the United States and Canada)

**Represent:** Retail, supermarket and other service-industry workers

**Time on job:** President since 1998

**Notable accomplishment:** Appelbaum led the fight to oppose the Kingsbridge Armory project in the Bronx—the first major Bloomberg administration land-use initiative scuttled by the City Council—with a veto override of 48 to 1.

Stuart Appelbaum was in Gov. David Paterson's close circle of advisors through last year.

And then he was one of the first prominent people to say publicly that Paterson should drop out. Not long after, Attorney General Andrew Cuomo paid him a visit, complete with a photo later circulated of the two together.

Appelbaum has had a long relationship with Cuomo: the union endorsed him a year and a half before he ran for attorney general in 2006. Even when



Republicans controlled the State Senate, the union supported Democrats, including in districts that were heavily Republican.

"I think it's important to speak up for the things that are right. The union has to stand for something," Appelbaum explained. "It makes it possible for others to stand up as well."

That is one reason why Appelbaum has built such a strong relationship both with the Democratic establishment in the city and with the state Democratic Party.

Though Appelbaum's fight with the Bloomberg administration over the Kingsbridge Armory and his strong advocacy for Bill Thompson have led to a somewhat chilly relationship with the mayor, Appelbaum said that his members were better served if the union stayed true to its principles rather than merely cozying up to power.

"We don't need to exist off the relationships between individuals and elected officials," he said. "What's important is that elected officials do things for the members of the union."

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## GREG FLOYD

**Teamsters Local 237**

**Number of members:** 24,000

**Represent:** A diverse pool of municipal employees in city agencies, such as school safety agents. Their largest group of workers is in the New York City Housing Authority.

**Time on job:** President since 2007

**Notable accomplishment:** Struck an on-time, two-year contract with the city as the economy was collapsing in 2008, which included 4-percent annual wage increases, without any major givebacks.

In the rare instance when Greg Floyd does call out the Bloomberg administration—such as rallies his members held to protest the underfunding of NYCHA several years ago—he does so in a way that is not meant to personally offend, he said.

"I tell them in advance what we're doing, and how we're doing it," Floyd said. "There's always a purpose to achieve a specific goal and outcome."

Floyd also exerts influence as a key board member of the New York City Employee Retirement System, which oversees a major section of the city's pension funds.

As for the union's recent political action, Local 237 was especially influential in the DA's race last year, becoming the first union to support Manhattan District Attorney Cy Vance in his successful election bid.

Floyd is seen as someone with a legitimate shot of being the next head of the Central Labor Committee, the city's umbrella labor organization. But in response to questions about whether he would be interested in the job, Floyd was characteristically circumspect.

"I'm always very careful and very minding of my position in the pecking order," he said.



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## FAYE MOORE

**Social Service Employees Union 371**

**Number of members:** 17,000

**Represent:** Social service and juvenile justice workers

**Time on job:** President since 2008

**Notable accomplishment:** The union has won more grievance claims for its members than any other DC 37 local.

These are tough times to lead a public-sector union in New York City. And the job is especially tough for Faye Moore, whose members work in social services that are often on the frontline of cuts, including 109 layoffs slated to occur June 25.

Still, those who work with Moore say she has been building strong relations with members of the City Council and other interest groups that have helped the union stave off the worst reductions proposed by the Bloomberg administration.

"We don't just come around when we have problems," Moore said, explaining her approach. "We're there to help advocacy groups when they have problems and we help people get access."



Notably, the union chose to back Council Speaker Christine Quinn in her re-election campaign last year, splitting from its parent union, District Council 37, which chose to stay neutral in the race. Afterwards, Moore said, Quinn called to personally thank her.

Moore said that her workers are often exploited because, by their very nature, they are in altruistic industries and are willing to work overtime without pay. Moore considers it her job to make sure they get compensated for their work and has been successful in winning a number of grievance cases on behalf of her members.

Moore is rumored as a potential successor to DC 37 executive director Lillian Roberts in 2013. But for now, she shrugs off such speculation.

"People say that, but that doesn't register with me," Moore said. "That's 2013. I'm more focused on June 25."



## PAT LYNCH

**Patrolmen's Benevolent Association**

**Number of members:** 23,000

**Represent:** Police officers

**Time on job:** President since 1999

**Notable accomplishment:** During his tenure, police officer salaries have increased by 55 percent.

When Pat Lynch took over as head of the world's largest police union, the first thing he did was tear down the plexiglass at the entrance of union headquarters and unlock its doors.

Following a period of strife and scandal in the union, Lynch said, he wanted his members to feel welcome and involved with the new regime, able to drop by and speak with him or anyone else in union leadership.

"It keeps us dialed in to go back and forth with the members, so that we know what we need to do," Lynch said.

Lynch has also raised the profile of the union substantially during his tenure, often appearing in the local media and, in 2002, holding a 50,000-strong rally in Times Square—the largest in the union's history.



The workload has been higher too: since the Sept. 11 attacks, Lynch's union has been faced with the challenge of highlighting the plight of members who became sick because of exposure to toxins during the cleanup of the World Trade Center site.

During his first three negotiations with the Bloomberg administration, Lynch was forced into arbitration, winning large salary increases each time. In their last negotiation in 2006, though, the PBA struck a deal with the city for a 17-percent salary increase, which Lynch said was part of a long process of building up relations with the Bloomberg administration. After endorsing Bloomberg's opponents in his first two mayoral campaigns, the PBA backed Bloomberg in 2009.

Though there has always been—and continues to be—a natural friction with Police Commissioner Ray Kelly, Lynch said that relationship has also remained civil.

"Do we fight? Yes," Lynch said. "But we get along as professionals."