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Union Effort Is Grooming Candidates in New Jersey

By RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA

SADDLE BROOK, N.J. — Ballots cast throughout New Jersey on Tuesday will list hundreds of candidates, their parties and the offices they seek. But for 53 candidates, the ballots will not say one of the most important things they have in common: union-approved.

These people running for town councilman, mayor, county freeholder and other posts are graduates of a state A.F.L.-C.I.O. boot camp that has been more successful than any other such effort in the nation at recruiting, training and supporting union members who run for elective office.

The program, which costs the federation about \$250,000 a year to run but is free for participants, has groomed more than 160 current officeholders — the overwhelming majority of them Democrats — including 8 members of the Legislature, 12 county freeholders, 18 mayors and a county clerk.

Many of these elected officials are not just members but leaders in their unions: the president of the State Senate, for example, is a paid organizer for the ironworkers. Five current members of the Legislature, in fact, are employees of unions, including one senator who is also the leader of the Southern New Jersey Central Labor Council of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. In the rest of the country, according to a 2007 study by the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#), there are nine lawmakers who are also

union officials.

“The concept was to take our members and apprentice them in the field of politics, just as we apprentice them in their own crafts,” said Charles Wowkanech, the president of the state A.F.L.-C.I.O. “We started with zoning boards, school boards, councils, then mayor, freeholder, and then senators and assemblyman.”

“Corporate America is very good at electing their people,” Mr. Wowkanech said. “If it’s good for them, why can’t it be good for us?”

It is hardly unusual for unions to be involved in political campaigns — in virtually every state, they provide candidates with critical ground troops for time-intensive tasks like walking precincts and making phone calls.

But at a Democratic campaign rally on Tuesday at the V.F.W. post in Saddle Brook, union members were not just the ones scooping pasta at the buffet table. Two of them were candidates on the stage: James M. Carroll, a Bergen County freeholder running for re-election, and Joseph Setticase, a Saddle Brook councilman running for mayor. Both are members of the [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers](#) and graduates of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. program.

“Without my union and the support of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., I wouldn’t be here,” Mr. Carroll said.

To qualify for the program, candidates must first have the backing of their union locals and their counties’ central labor councils. They attend a two-day session at [Rutgers University](#), with classes taught by politicians and political consultants.

“They really covered all the bases,” said Dominick Stampone, the mayor of Haledon, in Passaic County, who belongs to the [American Federation of Teachers](#) and attended the program last year. “They talked about fund-raising, campaign finance reporting, dealing with the media, addressing a room, crafting your message and also about the core values we believe in, like affordable health care and living wage requirements.”

After the boot camp, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. gives novice candidates advice while they are running, pays for mailings to support them and arranges for volunteers to work on their campaigns. Similar efforts have been tried elsewhere, but none compare in size or success to New Jersey's, which began in 1997 and has grown steadily.

Even labor's political opponents expressed admiration. "The political parties supposedly try to do the same thing, to groom candidates from the grass roots, but the A.F.L.-C.I.O. does it more effectively," said Richard J. LaRossa, a Republican former state senator who leads a conservative policy group, [Solutions for New Jersey](#).

Besides the five current legislators who are union employees, five more in New Jersey are current or former shop stewards or local presidents, and perhaps two dozen others are or have been union members. Most come from private-sector unions, particularly in the building trades — the electrical workers are especially well-represented.

New Jersey ranks fifth among the states in union membership (New York is first), but it has declined over the last decade. Last year, 19.9 percent of New Jersey's work force was union-represented (compared with 13.6 percent nationally and 27.2 percent in New York), down from 21.7 percent in 2000.

Mr. LaRossa and other critics contend that the unions' electoral success contributes to the high cost of government in New Jersey, a core issue in a state where Gov. [Chris Christie](#), a Republican, has clashed with labor and lawmakers over salaries, pensions, staffing and overlapping layers of government. "The labor agenda is pay more, build more, hire more, spend more," Mr. LaRossa said.

Indeed, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. program has been crucial in recent union victories in Trenton, including a law allowing government agencies to require even nonunion contractors to adhere to the terms of union contracts; one mandating paid family leave for many private-sector workers; and a "card check" provision making it possible for employees to unionize without elections.

“When I’m dealing with the public’s money, I’m going to make sure the public is treated fairly,” said Stephen M. Sweeney, the State Senate president, who is also a general organizer for the International Association of Ironworkers and the leader of the Gloucester County Board of Freeholders. “Getting over on somebody like me is a lot more difficult than getting over on somebody who doesn’t know labor and doesn’t know contracts.”

Mr. Sweeney noted that he has had a rocky relationship with the New Jersey Education Association, the main teachers’ union, which is the governor’s favorite foil, but conceded that “when I was the chair of the labor committee, it was hard to be objective.”

Mr. Wowkanech of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. said the boot-camp program began at a time when “organized labor was finding it very difficult to move its agenda, and all we were doing was testifying against the agenda that business and industry wanted.”



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