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Spirit of Graciousness For New Boss, Unions

Randi Weingarten was making up for lost time.

As president of the United Federation of Teachers, Weingarten runs a union that has worked without a contract for more than a year. This is not a good thing for a union leader. And as the city gets broker, a deal for the teachers gets even tougher to achieve.

A nice, new contract isn't the only thing on Weingarten's agenda. It's as crowded as a sixth-grade classroom in Long Island City. Recruiting qualified teachers, keeping class size down, getting disruptive students out of the room — all of it is dependent on help from the man in City Hall.



Ellis Henican

But actions have consequences. And Weingarten didn't curry much useful favor with her endorsements in the mayor's race.

Quite the opposite. Her union this time went a sparkling 0 for 3.

That's the same nose for a winner, incidentally, that was displayed by the Newsday editorial page. You can decide whose nod delivers more votes. But Weingarten's union, like my friends on the editorial page, backed Alan Hevesi in the first primary, Freddy Ferrer in the runoff and Mark Green in the general.

Ouch!

Actually, a newspaper can shrug that off. We don't approach City Hall at contract time.

But for a big municipal union — and Weingarten's isn't alone here — this is dangerous territory indeed. Dangerous and crowded. Among the big public unions — hospital workers, transit workers, cops, firefighters, the sprawling DC 37 — only one of the majors endorsed Michael Bloomberg: the city corrections officers.

Randi Weingarten can read an election return as well as anyone. And she knows the second rule of politics, which is always to look forward, not back. (The first, one that may not serve the unions as well, is "Torture your enemies, reward your friends.")

But Bloomberg seems also to want to look forward. He needs to govern, after all. So for the past two days, he has been traipsing around the city and meeting with various people who did everything they could to make sure he would never, ever, ever get the job.

It's the "bygones tour," and Weingarten was as eager as any union leader to jump on board.

"Unlike other people," she said, moments before Bloomberg appeared in her office on Park Avenue South, "I'm not going to play the sour-grapes game. Bloomberg won."

And suddenly, here was the billionaire mayor-elect, looking not like a man intent on revenge — but like a man who was also in the market for a few new friends.

One of his top priorities, he told her, is taking care of the 250,000 people who soon will call him not just "Mr. Mayor" but also "boss." And that includes paying them. "They in the end are the peo-

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ple who do the work," he said. "I'm a believer in compensating those people who are working for the city as well as we can."

In the private meeting, the teachers union leader and the mayor-elect promised cooperation. She gave him a union sweatshirt. He told her to keep on negotiating with Rudy Giuliani until his term ends.

It was that kind of back-and-forth — tentative, vague but conducted in a tone noticeably cheerier than the harsh one we've gotten used to in the Giuliani years.

For now, it was a start. And that was probably good enough after a season of 0 for 3. Only Norman Seabrook, president of the Correction Officers Benevolent Association, doesn't have to make up for any lost time.

"Is this Deputy Mayor Seabrook?" I asked when I got him on his cell phone at the end of day. I'm sure I wasn't the first person to make a crack like that.

"No, no, no," Seabrook protested. "Don't start with that. Mike didn't promise me a job. He didn't promise he'd do this for me or that for me. I'm happy with the job I have."

Seabrook had gotten some grief over the Bloomberg endorsement from fellow labor leaders, he said.

"One told me I was out my — mind," he said. "Another one said, 'Are you crazy? How could you go with a loser?' Another one just laughed at me. I got a lot of laughing. The list goes on and on. I tried to convince people."

He didn't get far with that. Only the tiny Correction Captains Association signed on to the Bloomberg team before Election Day.

Now, the line runs all the way to the street.

"I'm not one of those guys that goes around tooting my own horn," Seabrook said. "I did what I felt was right in my heart, with guidance from the man upstairs."

And he's not asking for anything special in return, Seabrook swore. "Just treat my members with the same respect as other uniformed services," like the cops and the firefighters.

Still, he didn't need any get-to-know-you meetings yesterday. And that was saying something for a labor leader.

"Anything I can do to help my fellow unions," Norman Seabrook said, in the new spirit of graciousness.

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