

The Works

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Make No Small Plans

Can a union activist and an ex-city worker topple City Council?

By Ben Joravsky

The votes in last month's primary hadn't even been counted when union activist Matt Brandon began working on the next big prize: the February 2007 aldermanic elections. As he sees it, one of the biggest problems in Chicago politics is a City Council that's too compliant with the mayor and out of touch with the needs of unionized public employees. So he plans to rally his union behind a slate of labor-friendly, independent-minded challengers in almost every ward, sending out campaign workers to get them elected. "At some point you have to take a stand," says Brandon, secretary-treasurer of the Service Employees International Union Local 73. "The rubber-stamp mentality of the council has got to change."

That's tough talk for a Chicago union official, and it's far from certain if Brandon can back it up. In fact, it's a sign of the unions' weakness that they didn't get tough years ago. There are well over 70,000 public service employees, teachers included, required by residency laws to live within the city's borders. If the municipal unions ever took advantage of their numbers they could send waves of volunteers into every precinct in the city, unleashing enough political energy to drive every bum out of office.

But they don't flex their muscle, in part because their leadership routinely backs Mayor Daley and the council no matter how much they limit raises, privatize the workforce, or raid pension funds. As several union officials have explained it to me, they pull their punches

on the assumption that if they fight they'll lose and then wind up with even less than they already have.

"You have to change the mind-set," says Brandon. "You can't just let people keep kicking you."

Brandon understands that there might not be a lot of public sympathy for city employees, what with all the reports of featherbedding, workers sleeping in their cars during shifts, or union bosses using their clout to get their inexperienced sons high-paying city jobs. "I don't condone any of that," he says. "It makes me sick to my stomach like everyone else. But most workers don't have that kind of clout. Most of them are watching jobs get privatized or wages cut or health benefits cut while they get blamed for everything that's wrong."

To step up the challenge, Brandon convinced SEIU Local 73, which represents about 3,000 city workers, to take the controversial step of hiring Frank Coconate as a political strategist. Coconate, as you may recall from the August 5 *Reader* cover story, is the lifelong patronage worker from the northwest side who was fired from his \$62,000-a-year job as a safety inspector in the city's sewer department after the city accused him of "falsifying the signatures of crew members in reports he submitted" and "falsifying reports regarding work sites he was supposed to inspect." Coconate says the city trumped up the charges to punish him for calling on city workers to back Jesse Jackson Jr. against Daley in 2007. He has appealed his termination, and



Matt Brandon and Frank Coconate

his case is currently before a hearing officer. If he wins, the city will have to hire him back with back pay. For now, "this is a dream job for me," says Coconate. "I love this stuff."

Brandon says his local will leave an endorsement decision on the mayor's race to SEIU's statewide council. But he and Coconate are planning to support challengers against almost every alderman who's voted for the mayor's budgets over the last four years. It's a long list—every budget has been passed almost unanimously. Only Third Ward alderman Dorothy Tillman and Fourth Ward alderman Toni Preckwinkle voted against the 2004 budget; in 2005 it was Preckwinkle alone.

Brandon may be able to cause trouble for aldermen on the northwest side, which has a relatively high number of city employees and is wealthier and more liberal minded than it used to be.

Tom Allen, alderman of the 38th Ward, has voted for each of Daley's budgets. But Brandon and Coconate are supporting him because he's the chief sponsor of the Public Service Accountability Act, which if passed would make the city document the supposed savings before privatizing city jobs. Allen claims he's rounded up 30 backers, but the bill's been buried in committee, and given the mayor's support of privatization, it's doubtful it will ever be called to a vote.

Most aldermen I've talked to are reluctant to speak publicly about SEIU's proposed challenge until the union actually endorses candidates. In general, however, they say the unions

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have little to complain about, given the city's budget constraints. They also point to their support for prolabor measures like the big-box ordinance, which requires giant retailers like Wal-Mart to pay workers at least \$10 an hour.

Brandon's unmoved. "You can't vote to privatize the workforce and then say you're pronoun 'cause you vote for a big-box ordinance that will make the Wal-Marts and Targets pay employees \$10 an hour," he says. "It's good press—rah-rah. But it's sugarcoating, a Band-Aid on the wound. These aren't jobs that you can support a family on. The real problem is that the middle class is dying in this city—labor's being run out of town. We have to elect aldermen who are willing to stand up for labor."

Will Brandon succeed? The odds are against him. It's hard to imagine powerhouse incumbents like 36th Ward alderman William Banks, chairman of the zoning committee, or 33rd Ward alderman Richard Mell losing. Already aldermanic aides tell me that their bosses are gearing up for next year's election by having the city pave streets and sidewalks to convince the masses that they'll get better services by sticking with the incumbents. And many voters may be unsympathetic to the cause of labor—particularly if firing city workers leads to savings that can keep a lid on property taxes.

But Brandon may be able to cause trouble for aldermen on the northwest side, which has a relatively high number of city employees and is wealthier and more liberal minded than it used to be, qualities that generally lead to a more independent electorate. In the 2004 Democratic senate primary, for instance, Barack Obama edged out the party candidate, Dan Hynes, in the northwest wards.

At the same time, incumbents can't just rely on Daley's support anymore. As one aldermanic aide told me, "the mayor's backing ain't what it used to be." Three years ago, in the last aldermanic race, challengers Manny Flores and Rey Colon beat Daley-backed incumbents in the 1st and 35th wards.

Brandon's betting that Daley's reach may be even weaker in 2007, what with the city's corruption scandals and anti-patronage judicial rulings diminishing the numbers of his army. But in any case, Brandon says, it's time to take a risk. He's already started meeting with potential challengers and plans to have a slate up by the start of the summer.

"The election's really right around the corner—less than a year away—it's time to get started," he says. "I'm tired of the complacency. Let's shake things up." ■