

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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OPINION

The Emerging Political Divide Between Public and Private Unions

Clashes between government employees and blue-collar organizations are roiling Democratic campaigns.

By **STEVEN MALANGA**

Oct. 24, 2014 6:44 p.m. ET

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel has earned the ire of government-worker unions by supporting cuts in pension benefits for some city workers and closing failing schools. The head of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, has pledged \$1 million of union money to unseat Mr. Emanuel, up for re-election in February.

Private unions have a different take. Building trade groups like the Construction and General Laborers' District Council approve of the mayor's infrastructure spending and have donated heavily to his campaign. The hotel-workers union Unite Here has endorsed him for his work promoting Chicago tourism. "There's a lot of support I have from working men and women," Mr. Emanuel told a reporter earlier this year, when the subject of public-union opposition came up.

The labor rift in Chicago politics has emerged elsewhere, too. Government workers are increasingly fighting to defend their pay and benefits, including trying to defeat officials running for re-election who have preached fiscal reform. But private unions have embraced some of these same candidates, arguing that when economic growth is sluggish, politicians should focus on creating jobs. The conflict is roiling Democratic primary campaigns and even pushing some labor groups into the arms of Republican candidates.

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, center, is joined by workers during his State of the State address in 2013.
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The split played a prominent role in the contentious Democratic gubernatorial primary in Rhode Island. State Treasurer Gina Raimondo earned a national reputation engineering an overhaul of government pensions in 2011. On Sept. 9 Ms. Raimondo captured the Democratic Party's gubernatorial nomination by defeating two candidates heavily backed by public unions. Ms. Raimondo earned her victory with significant support from blue-collar labor groups, like the Rhode Island Building Trades Council, which endorsed her call for an infrastructure bank to spur more investment in a state with the third-highest unemployment rate.

That support was especially crucial when the campaign of one of Ms. Raimondo's opponents, Providence Mayor Angel Taveras, attacked her by suggesting her pension overhaul had benefited Wall Street money managers but harmed government workers. "Stop lying about Gina," the head of the building-trades group said in a statement defending Ms. Raimondo.

In New Jersey, a handful of state Democratic legislators who are also private-union officials voted for a bill in 2011 that cut government-employee benefits. Later that year the state's AFL-CIO union refused to endorse the legislators for re-election, including Senate President Steve Sweeney, an official of the ironworkers union, and Assemblyman John Amodeo, a unionized crane operator. Building-trades representatives walked out of the AFL-CIO in protest. The controversy reverberated in last year's gubernatorial election when some two-dozen private unions, mostly in the buildings trade, endorsed Republican Chris Christie instead of his Democratic opponent, State Sen. Barbara Buono. Public unions heavily opposed Mr. Christie.

Private-sector labor groups have grown restive at incessant calls by government unions for higher taxes. They are also at odds with the leftward drift of other key members of the Democratic coalition, including environmental groups, which have tried to thwart job-creating projects such as the Keystone XL Pipeline.

In Wisconsin, Gov. Scott Walker's Act 10 bill in 2010 reduced collective-bargaining rights for many public workers and sparked widespread labor demonstrations. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees has named Mr. Walker their No. 1 target for defeat this year. But Mr. Walker signed legislation in 2013 that streamlined mining regulations in order to attract outside investment, not to mention the private jobs that would come with it.

Every Democratic member of the Wisconsin legislature opposed the bill on environmental grounds, but blue-collar unions like the Wisconsin Pipe Trades and the

Milwaukee Buildings and Trades Council supported the governor. When Mr. Walker advocated for the regulatory changes during his state of the state address in 2013, more than a dozen blue-collar workers stood behind him and unfurled a giant Wisconsin state flag. Several trade unions, including those representing pipefitters, carpenters and heavy equipment operators, later contributed to Mr. Walker's campaign.

"We lost our jobs," said Lyle Balistreri of the Milwaukee Buildings and Trade Council when asked how he could support the governor. "We suffered 30%, 40%, 50% unemployment in many areas of the state."

In Pennsylvania, too, government unions have united to defeat Republican incumbent Gov. Tom Corbett, who wants to privatize unionized state liquor stores. But Mr. Corbett is an ardent supporter of fracking, which has helped create some 15,000 oil-and-gas jobs in the state. The Pittsburgh-based Boilermakers Local 154, whose 2,300 members are heavily involved in construction and maintenance projects in energy, endorsed Mr. Corbett, declaring that he "has kept his promise to fight for Pennsylvania jobs."

Union controversies are beginning to play in national politics, too. So far in the 2014 election cycle, the American Federation of Teachers has given \$1.7 million to 202 Democratic congressional candidates and \$5,000 to one Republican. The Carpenters and Joiners Union has contributed \$418,000 to 46 GOP candidates and slightly more than \$1 million to 150 Democrats in congressional races.

Other blue-collar unions are following suit. The New Jersey Building and Construction Trades Council, a labor umbrella group, recently highlighted its endorsement of four Republican congressional candidates as part of a "commitment to a broad, bipartisan approach to solving our nation's economic problems."

To be sure, many private unions still support legislation, such as boosting the minimum wage, that some Republican candidates would find it difficult to endorse. Nevertheless, the rift in the union movement is making campaigning difficult for Democratic candidates.

In New York, building trade unions wanted the state's AFL-CIO to endorse Gov. Andrew Cuomo in his primary campaign against newcomer Zephyr Teachout. But public-union opposition to Cuomo policies like a cap on property-tax increases prompted the group to sit out the campaign. Without labor's formidable grass-roots organization, Mr. Cuomo won an unimpressive primary victory. That emboldened Mr.

Cuomo's Republican challenger, Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino, and may give a jolt to his lagging fundraising efforts. "There is no passion whatsoever for Andrew Cuomo," Mr. Astorino declared. Some unions agree.

Adapted from a forthcoming issue of City Journal, where Mr. Malanga is senior editor.

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