



COMMUNIQUE

HOW LABOR IS CHANGING THE FACE OF AMERICAN POLITICS

By Marci Rosenblum, Local 1180 Communications Director

The working class was inarguably the ultimate driving force in this year's midterm elections, turning out in droves both in New York and across the country to make sure that union's candidates were elected.

Since the mid 1970s, the labor movement has been traveling a road of uphill battles, marked by some great successes and some tough defeats. But the working class is #unionstrong and that strength was never more prevalent than in the November 2018 election.

"Unions were built out of tough times," said Local 1180 President Gloria Middleton. "We experienced a major defeat this summer with the Janus case, but that didn't bring us down. In reality, it made us a much tighter-knit group and strengthened our resolve to succeed."

Across the country, union members came out in record numbers to back labor-friendly candidates, and do everything in their power to unseat labor's top foes. Middleton said the 2018 midterm election took on an urgency previously unseen anytime in recent history, with the highest voter turnout since before World War I. Since #45 became president, a new wave of political engagement has become evident. Not since the civil rights and anti-war movements has "people power" lead the way for change.

Americans are more civically engaged than they have been in more than 100 years. "Midterm elections proved to be a litmus test. Battleground states and battleground seats played a key role in influencing the direction of politics not only in New York, but across the country. The new blue wave owes a huge debt to the working class who hit the ground with aspirations of asserting a vision of justice, equality and unification," Middleton said.

Just slightly more than 50 percent of eligible voters turned out to cast their ballots in this year's midterms, according to the United States Elections Project. In numbers, that means 118,044,470 votes were cast, placing 40 new Democrats into the White House. Up for grabs were the entire House of Representatives, a third of the Senate, 36 governorships across the country, and many state legislative seats.

"We can definitely attribute this unprecedented turnout to the negativity promoted by #45," Middleton said. "Without realizing it, he certainly motivated the working class to get to the polls. It's safe to say that the

anti-Trump movement was the impetus for the record-setting turnout that leaves Democrats now able to veto any new laws that could harm the working class and be a more watchful eye over Washington shenanigans."

2018 saw the highest percentage of midterm voter turnout since 1914, when 50.4 percent of eligible voters went to the polls. The next-highest rate was in the 1966 midterms, when 48.7 percent of eligible voters voted in the midterms. This year far surpassed the low turnout rates in the 2010 and 2014 midterms, the latter of which was only 36.7 percent, the lowest in 72 years, according to Vox.com.

Numbers do tell a story, though. Young adults motivated by social issues and dissatisfied with the Trump administration turned out in record numbers to vote and backed Democratic candidates by historic margins, according to U.S. News. Thirty-one percent of voters aged 18 to 29 cast ballots in the 2018 midterm elections, shattering turnout rates from the past quarter century, according to an estimate by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University. Estimates claim this year's turnout was at least 10 percent higher than for the 2014 midterms, and these young voters predominantly backed Democrats. Initial exit polls showed that more than two-thirds of voters aged 18 to 29 voted for Democrats in the 2018 election, compared with 32 percent who supported Republican candidates.

This is the exact age range category that is important to target as our next generation of labor leaders. Their values and priorities are in stark contrast to those of our country's current political leaders. As can be seen from the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Florida, when teens coalesce around an issue of importance to them, their channeled activism makes waves — and news.

While voter turnout numbers are the clearest way to measure Americans' political engagement, Middleton said it's equally as important to pay attention to working-class involvement in political organizing, phone banking, canvassing, protesting, contacting elected officials, or even donating money to a campaign. Local 1180 members are a clear example of just how active unions were in the midterms. As the union mobilized its members to help with campaigns this year, an increasing number of members brought their children and grandchildren to help out and get involved.

Under the guidance of Second Vice President and Political Director Gerald Brown and Mobilization Coordinator Helen S. Jarrett, Local 1180 provided ongoing support services for a variety of successful candidates, most notably Letitia James in her bid for New York Attorney General and John Liu, Queens Senator-elect (see pages 6-7).

"It wasn't only this year's midterms that we were working for," Brown said. "Unions have become much more proactive in recent years and are already gearing up for state and federal elections in the next few years. We want to make sure we ride the blue wave from this year as we head into upcoming elections."

It was actual feet on the ground that made all the difference as getting out the vote was driven by conversations between union members at the door, on the phone, and at worksites. "There was more mobilizing this year than I remember in a while. Our members are more motivated and more determined to make change. They know the status quo just won't work," Brown said. "It can't be about the 1%; they can fend for themselves. Labor made it clear that it's not about prioritizing the demands of the elite few."

All that effort certainly paid off, with close to 750 union candidates elected into office. Nevada, Michigan, Minnesota, Illinois, Colorado, Maine, Kansas ... pick a state and it's likely that the labor movement was able to get someone into office. Working people made all the difference in not only getting labor-friendly candidates into office, but removing ones who have proven themselves as anti-labor, such as Scott Walker and Bruce Rauner.

"It's definitely good riddance to the likes of those two," Middleton said in echoing the sentiments of top labor leaders across the country. "Their main goal was to undermine the labor movement and take away rights and benefits we have worked for and earned. Karma is unforgiving and always gets payback. In this case, labor came together stronger than ever in Wisconsin and Illinois to make sure that the dish of revenge was served cold."

Many state lawmakers elected this year will still be in office in 2020 when the post-census redrawing of congressional districts begins. Who stays in office and who gets gerrymandered out will have a huge impact on labor's fight to protect public education and vital public services; to demand safe, gun-free schools; to make higher education affordable; to ensure affordable healthcare for those with pre-existing conditions; and to make America welcoming to all nationalities.

In New York, this election saw a shift of power in the state Senate, previously controlled by Republicans with the slimmest of margins. Post midterm, Democrats now control the entire state, including Governor, Lt. Governor, Attorney General, Comptroller, Senate and Assembly. Even the state's two Congressional Senators are Democrats. This shift in power is a result of the working people's cry for change. The election saw a record number of women and minorities sent to Congress.

"We are the middle class. We are black. We are white. We are male. We are female. We are married. We are single. We are young, and we are old. But we all have a common story. We are tired of a corporate-controlled government where only the voice of the 1 percent is heard," Middleton said. "Even our country's youth know that if we don't make change, and make change soon, there will not be a future for them in the working middle class because there won't be a working middle class."

"We need to harness the energy and enthusiasm of labor in the midterm elections and use it to further enhance our standing in politics across the country. Low income voters, young voters, immigrants, and voters of color need to stay involved for our groundswell to continue," she said.

Second Vice President Brown said that there is so much on the legislative line for the working class that getting involved and staying involved from the campaign trail all the way to the ballot box was crucial. Abortion rights, education, taxes, social service programs, and of course, labor rights, all have their fates now resting in the hands of those election night victors.

"We need to turn our country around," Brown said. "The traditional labor structure of previous decades just won't work any more. We need labor activism from the younger generation, we need to be proactive, not reactive, and most importantly, we need to make America as a whole understand that labor not only fights for itself, but for the entire working population."

The story of the midterm elections, however, is not really a story. It's simply one chapter in the history of the labor movement book that sets the tone for future chapters. Politicians who received labor's support to get into office now have to prove themselves once they take office. If not, they need to remember that those who helped them get elected can just as easily work to get them unelected the next time.

The results of this year's midterm elections will shape the American political landscape for many years to come. Unions helped make the midterm victories a reality.