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Unions Might Find a Friend in City Hall

Three Leading Democratic Candidates Say They Would Back Organizing Efforts

By [ANDREW GROSSMAN](#)

Private-sector labor unions could have a strong ally in the next mayor as they embark on new efforts to organize workers in New York City.

The three leading Democratic candidates in next Tuesday's primary for mayor said Wednesday that they would back efforts to organize private-sector workers into labor unions, a stance that would be a break from the hands-off approach Mayor [Michael Bloomberg](#) has taken in such battles.

That could mean increased pressure from City Hall on industries such as fast-food restaurants and car washes, which have been the target of unionization drives as unions try to increase their membership by reaching into industries that employ low-wage workers.



Getty Images

Democratic mayoral candidate Bill de Blasio at a demonstration in Union Square last month supporting fast-food workers.

Public Advocate Bill de Blasio, the front-runner in recent polls, has been most explicit about the role of the mayor in such efforts. Asked on Wednesday about his approach to private-sector unionization, he said elected officials "have to think like community organizers."

"It's clear the decline of the union movement in this country has correlated with the decline of the middle class," Mr. de Blasio said. "And we have to strengthen the labor movement, particularly in the private sector if we're going to have a chance of having a strong middle class again."

Mr. de Blasio said that as public advocate he supported fast-food workers who want to unionize and telecom workers who battled their employers—causes also embraced by other Democratic candidates.

He said he would continue to support those workers: "I think a leader saying to private-sector leaders that you have to treat your workers fairly will make a difference."

Kathy Wylde, president of the Partnership for New York City, a business group, said the next mayor should have a constructive relationship with both labor and employers.

More[New Quinn Ad Hits de Blasio as He Surges](#)

"I am not sure why a candidate would want to send a broadside message to the city's employers that he would be an adversary in private-sector labor negotiations, unless the business

community no longer matters to them," she said. "New York City is a location of choice for many businesses, but that is not something we can afford to take for granted."

Later in the day, two other Democrats in the mayoral race, former city Comptroller Bill Thompson and City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, took similar positions when asked about Mr. de Blasio's stance.

"As mayor, I think it's a good idea to encourage people to join unions," Mr. Thompson said. "You want to see a city of equity. You want to see a city that people are able to live in this city, that income gap continues to be bridged, that people can have a decent living."

Ms. Quinn said it is "absolutely an appropriate place for the mayor to have a voice in support of working men and women and to stand up on behalf of working men and women who have a right and want to form a union."

The three Democrats have already been vocal allies of unions. But there has been little they could do to help workers organize in their current jobs, apart from giving speeches that often receive little notice. As mayor, they would control the machinery of city government and have a more prominent public voice.

"There are policing functions and licensing functions that the mayor controls that could be used to help unions," said Josh Freeman, a history professor at the City University of New York. "There are some modest but real tools I think a mayor could use to promote unionism, most of all the bully pulpit."

The two major Republican candidates were critical of using City Hall to promote unions.

"I think [Mr. de Blasio] is radical and I think he is wrong," said businessman John Catsimatidis, whose holdings include the Gristedes chain of a grocery stores, which has a unionized work force. "I'm not antiunion but I don't want to be anti-job growth either and my concern is by creating a platform like that more companies will stay away like we had the plague."

Joe Lhota, a former chairman of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and a former aide to Mayor Rudy Giuliani, said the mayor's only role in talks between private employers and their workers should be to facilitate an agreement and make sure that the right to organize isn't infringed upon—not to push a particular outcome.

"It is not the role of the City of New York to encourage it or discourage it," he said of moves to unionize workers. "The City of New York needs to be agnostic about this."

In some ways, the Democratic candidates' stance harks back to the first half of the 20th century, when New York mayors such as Fiorello La Guardia sought to promote private-sector unionization. Mr. de Blasio cited Mr. La Guardia's example when asked about his

stance on organizing workers.

Former Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa presents a more recent example. In 2006, he brokered talks that resulted in 5,000 nonunion security guards at buildings owned by a large commercial property owner being allowed to join a new local of the Service Employees International Union.

—Joe Jackson and John Surico contributed to this article.

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