

New York billionaire engineers legislative “coup”

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13 June 2009

The New York State Legislature was thrown into chaos this past Monday when two of the State Senate’s Democratic members suddenly announced they were joining with the Republican minority to reestablish de facto Republican control, less than six months after the Republicans lost their majority for the first time in 40 years.

The two Democrats, Pedro Espada Jr. of the Bronx and Hiram Monserrate of Queens, declared that they were joining a “reform” coalition. In return for his support, Espada, who is facing various legal charges and investigations concerning misappropriation of funds, violations of campaign finance rules and charges that he has moved out of the district he represents, was rewarded with the post of president of the Senate, placing him next in line to assume the office of governor.

Espada had reportedly clashed with the Democratic Senate leadership earlier this year after it blocked his attempt to gain \$2 million in appropriations for non-profits connected to a private health center that he runs, which is also under investigation.

Monserrate, who has emerged as the deciding vote in the state’s upper house, was indicted on felony assault charges in March for slashing his girlfriend’s face with a broken glass. Democrats claim that his disaffection stems from the Senate leadership’s stripping him of a committee chairmanship and the \$12,500 stipend that goes with it after his indictment.

A few months ago, Republicans were demanding that Monserrate resign after he was indicted. Now, they are presenting him as a champion of “reform” for his self-serving change of loyalties.

The Democratic leadership denounced the Republican-led revolt as illegal and locked the doors of the Senate

chamber. They went to court to challenge the legitimacy of the “coup,” but New York Democratic Governor David Paterson pointed out that even if they won on procedural grounds, they still lacked the votes to elect the leadership.

Paterson, whose political approval rating has fallen to 21 percent, owes his governorship to a March 2008 FBI-orchestrated sting operation that ensnared his predecessor, Eliot Spitzer, in a prostitution scandal.

On Thursday, Espada produced his own key to the Senate chamber, and the Senate convened without the rest of the Democrats, but the session was quickly adjourned when Monserrate walked out saying he needed more time to discuss with his Democratic colleagues. There was increasing speculation that a new round of horse-trading could lead to the replacement of Malcolm Smith as the Democratic majority leader.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the latest political skirmish in Albany, the events of the past several days have made several things clear. Although there was talk from both sides of the need for a resolution in order to carry out legislative action, including a bill on same-sex marriage, there is not a shred of principle separating Espada and Monserrate from their fellow Democrats, nor for that matter, any fundamental differences between Albany’s Democratic and Republican camps as a whole. This is a fight in which the opposing sides bear a strong resemblance to pigs at the trough, squabbling over money and perks of office.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the whole sordid business is the role of Tom Golisano, a billionaire businessman from upstate New York who apparently orchestrated the so-called revolt. Golisano has used his money to buy influence in state government for some years. He has also made three

failed runs for governor on the Independence Party ticket, campaigns in which he spent a total of \$93 million of his own considerable fortune.

Golisano has maneuvered between the two big business parties, and in last November's election, he backed several Democrats in state races and then took credit for the Democrats' success in winning a narrow majority in the State Senate.

According to the *New York Times*, when Golisano met with Senate Majority Leader Smith a few months ago to demand that the new majority drop its plans for modest tax increases for the wealthy, the billionaire was not treated with sufficient deference. After the taxes were enacted, Golisano changed his primary residence to Florida to avoid paying them and began meeting secretly with Republicans and with the two dissident Democrats

Espada and Monserrate were part of a "gang of four" Democrats who engaged in protracted negotiations before they gave their votes to the new majority last January. Only a few weeks ago, Espada was still bargaining with his own party leaders for legislative "earmarks," money for favored projects, as well as other perks. The Democratic leaders apparently played ball at first but then became less cooperative. As one columnist put it, the Democrats are complaining that "it was unfair of the Republicans to buy two senators whom the Democrats had already paid for, fair and square."

Identity politics also plays a significant role in this dispute. Golisano and the Republicans easily made use of tensions between Latino and black Democratic politicians. After years of peddling the reactionary claim that race and ethnic origin—rather than class—constitute the decisive dividing line in society, these political hacks are falling out over the petty spoils of office. As one observer put it, they are speaking of "Latino representation" and "community liberation," but are in fact "negotiating for better jobs for themselves or their children."

The attempt by the billionaire Golisano to change the legislative leadership in Albany because of his resentment about being asked to accept a minimal increase in taxes is emblematic of the way official politics works in every state capital in the United States and in Washington itself. He and his fellow members of America's ruling financial oligarchy are the principal

constituency of both major parties.

The business of crafting legislation is transacted behind the scenes between the corporate lobbyists and the servants of big business in political office.

In condemning the Albany coup, Governor Paterson invoked precisely this practice, elevating it to the level of principle. He called on the legislators to "act like adults here," and tried to convince them to come to their senses by telling them to "think of the lobbyists," who had worked hard "to persuade legislative leader and legislators of issues"! In other words, with the disruption of the Senate, important interests were being deprived of political services for which they had already paid.

New York, a state with 20 million inhabitants, is the financial and, arguably, the cultural capital of the United States. Yet, the political life of its state capital resembles nothing so much as a stereotypical "banana republic": its chief executive deposed by means of a politically motivated sex sting and the leadership of the upper house of its state legislature brought down in a political coup engineered by a billionaire.

These corrupt political methods are ultimately an expression of a society wracked by economic crisis and dominated by an immense chasm between the ruling financial oligarchy and the vast majority of the population that works for a living. Working people are politically disenfranchised, forced to choose between two parties dominated by big business and the wealthy elite. Under these conditions, politics is inevitably determined not by the will of the people and open debate, but by conspiracies, provocations and scandals.



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