

Arrests of New York politicians reveal systemic corruption

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The arrests of a number of New York area Democratic and Republican politicians in early April were the latest reminder of the systemic and pervasive corruption at the heart of capitalist politics on every level of government.

The most high-profile case involves Malcolm Smith, a Democratic state senator from the New York City borough of Queens. Smith, a former majority leader of the State Senate, had political ambitions and apparently decided to avoid the crowded Democratic field of candidates to succeed current mayor Michael Bloomberg by running as a Republican.

Smith is alleged to have offered cash bribes to a number of leaders of the city's Republican Party—Bronx Republican chairman Joseph Savino and Queens vice chairman Vincent Tabone—who in turn promised to obtain the necessary permissions to get the Queens Democrat on the Republican primary ballot. Also involved in this plot, along with other complicated dealings, was Queens city councilman Daniel Halloran, another Republican. The bipartisan crew of Smith, Halloran, Savino and Tabone were charged with various crimes, the Republicans with wire fraud and bribery, and Smith with extortion.

Bribes of between \$10,500 and \$25,000 were allegedly paid to five Republican politicians to obtain their cooperation in granting the special dispensation, under the 65-year-old state Wilson-Pakula Act, which allows candidates not registered in a given political party to nevertheless run in its primary if they receive permission from officials representing a majority of party voters. Smith is reported to have promised to facilitate real estate deals in which the politicians were involved and to grant other political favors should he be elected.

At first, it might seem outlandish for Smith, a black Democrat, to think that he could find electoral success as a Republican in New York. On the other hand, the city's ruling elite has carefully maneuvered, through its backing for Giuliani and then billionaire Bloomberg, to keep the

Democrats out of the mayor's office for 20 years.

There are virtually no political differences between the parties, only the issue of how to maintain Wall Street's grip on an increasingly angry working class. Many sections of the super-rich, however, have a visceral suspicion that a Democratic mayor will be insufficiently tough and thus open the floodgates to rebellion. Smith may have calculated that by running as an African-American Republican, he could market himself as the best man to continue the onslaught on workers and the poor.

The Queens Democrat had already made known his willingness to jump parties, joining with Republicans in Albany last fall to take control of the State Senate. The Democrats had eked out a majority in the November vote, but a group of Democratic apostates, including Smith, joined the Republican caucus in exchange for several perks like committee assignments and larger budgets.

The second, related corruption case involves the mayor and deputy mayor of the Village of Spring Valley, a community located just to the north of New York City, in an alleged bribery plot regarding the building of a community center on village land adjacent to the village hall. The deal involved both a \$10,000 cash bribe and the provision of a concealed stake in the project in compensation for a vote to transfer the property from the village to the private developer. Smith is alleged to have made promises related to this project as well.

A third federal case, like the others resulting from a sting operation, was announced a few days later. A member of the State Assembly is accused of accepting more than \$22,000 in bribes to facilitate a businessman's plan to construct adult day care centers in the Bronx. Legislation was reportedly to be introduced to prohibit construction of any competing facilities in the same area.

Reports on these cases include descriptions of meetings in parked cars, motel rooms and restaurants, including one that is known as the favorite of a former top leader of

organized crime in the city, with envelopes of money changing hands.

The sordid details reveal both the lack of any meaningful difference between the two main capitalist parties and the so-called pay-to-play culture in which money is the key element in gaining political office and determining political decisions.

The essential role of money in capitalist politics was laid out clearly by Smith's co-defendant Halloran. Clandestine audio recordings, made as part of the investigation, have him explaining, "That's politics. That's politics. It's all about how much. And that's our politicians in New York. They're all like that, all like that, and they get like that because of the drive that the money does for everything else. You can't do anything without [expletive] money."

These latest revelations are by no means out of the ordinary in New York State politics. Over the last several years, corruption scandals involving a State Senate majority leader, another state senator, and a state comptroller have all come to light. Since 2000, a total of 26 sitting New York state legislators have been indicted, arrested or implicated in corruption scandals.

Nor is this behavior restricted to local or state-level politics. To cite just one example in Washington, D.C., there is the recent case of the Democratic senator from New Jersey, Robert Menendez, who sought to resolve a multimillion-dollar Medicare billing dispute for a Florida ophthalmologist whose company had contributed more than \$700,000 toward the election of Senate Democrats. The exchange of money for political favors is the same, only the amounts involved are larger, as appropriate for dealings at a higher level of government.

The New York cases have prompted a renewed round of ritual hand-wringing among politicians and media pundits about the need to clean up politics. New York's Democratic governor Andrew Cuomo called the latest scandal an "opportunity" to undertake needed reform. In the next breath, the governor conceded that he was not at all serious. "People do stupid things, frankly. People do illegal things. People in power abuse power. And that's part of the human condition."

Banalities about the "human condition" are designed to obscure the terminal decay of American democracy, in which elections are bought and sold and the influence of the billionaires has recently been codified in a legal precedent set by the Supreme Court.

From time to time, the big business politicians talk of "reform." Cuomo's father, erstwhile liberal leader Mario

Cuomo, set up a commission to draw up reform proposals when he was governor 25 years ago. Corruption is more systemic than ever.

Smith, Halloran and the rest are petty representatives of big business. Like pigs at the trough, they watch with envy as their real masters in white-collar crime go scot free, as after the financial and housing collapse of 2008. The bribes alleged to have been offered in the latest cases are not even pocket change to the super-wealthy who buy trophy residences for tens of millions of dollars.

Voters know that corruption is embedded in politics. A Quinnipiac University poll released on April 11 revealed that more than 80% of New York City residents believe that government corruption is either "very serious" or "somewhat serious."

Within the capitalist class, bribery, the exchange of favors for money, and all sorts of financial dealings are not aberrations, but integral elements in the political process. Some forms of buying and selling influence—lobbying, campaign donations, and the like—are legally permitted. Others, though unofficial, are standard practice. Occasionally, as part of factional struggles within the ruling class or in an attempt to maintain the democratic veneer, a few scapegoats will be subjected to prosecution, accompanied by the obligatory sanctimonious pronouncements about the need for reform. All the while, however, the business of politics continues as usual.

The lead federal prosecutor in the current New York cases, U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara, said perhaps more than he intended when he concluded, "Any time you have a situation that happens again and again and again and it happens to people that should know better...then something is broken in the system."



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