

# Top Democrat in New York legislature convicted of corruption on all counts

Philip Guelpa  
2 December 2015

Democrat Sheldon Silver, the former Speaker of the New York State Assembly, was convicted Monday on all seven charges of corruption brought before a federal jury. His conviction after a six-week trial, and the ongoing trial of the former State Senate majority leader, Republican Dean Skelos, also on corruption charges, are only the latest in a string of revelations that expose the thoroughly rotten nature of capitalist politics in the state of New York.

Silver, who spent two decades as Assembly speaker, and nearly 40 years as a legislator, was found guilty on a variety of charges, all related to the use of his position for self-enrichment. The charges, brought by Preet Bharara, the United States attorney for the Southern District of New York, included honest services fraud, extortion and money laundering.

The 71-year-old Silver could be sentenced to 20 years in prison for each of the corruption charges, although the judge is likely to impose a much shorter term than would be imposed on a working class defendant convicted of seven felonies. The conviction automatically removes Silver from the state assembly, where he continued to draw a paycheck even after stepping down as speaker.

Among the specific corrupt practices on which he was convicted, Silver received a total of \$4 million in kickbacks from several law firms, for which he did no tangible work, in return for using his influence to arrange state funding for a Columbia University cancer researcher, who then referred patients with highly lucrative lawsuits back to those firms, steering real estate legal business to law firms with which he had ties, and for supporting rent and tax legislation favorable to real estate companies.

The connections with the real estate industry are especially notable in a city where developers and large

landlords are reaping tremendous profits while, at the same time, the working class is suffering from an extreme shortage of affordable housing.

As speaker, Silver was known as one of the three most powerful politicians in state government, alongside the governor and the majority leader of the state Senate. Dubbed the “three men in a room,” they made key policy decisions that were then ratified by the legislature.

The immediate past Senate majority leader, Dean Skelos, is currently on trial on similar corruption charges, including influence peddling and extortion, brought by the same federal prosecutor. There is widespread speculation over whether the third member of the state government troika, Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, may also face charges.

Silver’s defense amounted to arguing that he was only carrying on business as usual, that what he did was no different than the standard practices of all legislators, the wheeling and dealing which is necessary for government to function. Given the number of indictments and convictions on similar charges that have occurred in recent decades, his statement is evidently accurate in respect to New York state, which has been found among the most corrupt in America according to a study recently released by the Center for Public Integrity.

The pervasiveness of the practices engaged in by Silver, Skelos and numerous others in both parties constitutes damning proof that this is not the case of a few “bad apples.” The use of political office for personal benefit, as well as that of friends, family, and political and business associates, is an inherent part of the system, the purpose of which is to perpetuate and enhance the power and privileges of the capitalist class. Over the last decade and a half, over 30 New York

legislators have left office due to ethical misconduct, a further indication that “corruption” is, indeed, business as usual.

The fact that figures like Silver and Skelos, whose salaries and benefits as members of the legislature already dwarf those of most ordinary working people, felt the need, even the right, to engage in such illegal schemes to make millions more is testimony to the gulf between the corporate and political elite and the working class.

The occasional sacrifice of a few politicians under the rubric of “cleaning house” is a sham, which leaves the corporate and financial elite, whom these politicians serve, untouched. Indeed, such periodic purges are intended to mislead working people into thinking that reform of the system that operates entirely against their interests is possible.

At a time when economic distress and social polarization are becoming ever more acute, such displays take on added significance, as an increasingly desperate effort to blunt the growing anger against the capitalist system by covering up the political significance of the Silver case.

Typical was the editorial in the *New York Times* Tuesday, which in the course of six paragraphs of tub-thumping against corruption and self-dealing, managed to avoid mentioning the name of the political party that placed Silver in power in Albany. The omission was deliberate, since the *Times* backs the Democratic Party to the hilt.

The editorial demanded “a complete change of that toxic culture” in the state capital, suggesting that this could happen by replacing Silver and Skelos with other Democrats and Republicans who would be less rapacious. This amounts to nothing more than the demand by a leading spokesman for Wall Street interests that its servants in Albany do the bidding of the billionaires with less obvious personal plundering, i.e., more cheaply.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**