



M. Charles Bakst



A voice for labor: Downey up close

01:00 AM EST on Sunday, November 18, 2007

It's only mid-morning and already J. Michael Downey is having a bad day.

Downey, 53, is president of Council 94, the largest state employees union, a man who increasingly will be in the news in coming weeks as the state lays off workers and takes other steps to confront a first-class budget crisis.

On the day I visit Downey, he squeezes in the interview between a meeting about layoffs and an arbitration session, but what really has him fuming is a story in *The Providence Journal*: Governor Carcieri's announcement of the appointment of someone to be the state's first \$130,000-a-year director of the new Department of Revenue.

That someone is Gary Sasse, longtime executive director of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council. Sasse is a well-respected veteran on the state finance scene, but that's not what galls Downey. What infuriates him is that Carcieri is naming anyone to the pricey post on the eve of handing pink slips to hundreds of state employees.

Downey is not impressed by the idea that the appointment is in response to a state law. There are lots of jobs called for by law, he suggests.

The president of Council 94 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and I were at the University of Rhode Island in Kingston, where he heads an AFSCME local. (On other days, you might find him at Council 94 offices in North Providence.)

Downey said people — such as housekeepers in the student union or URI employees stopping in at Dunkin' Donuts — were venting about the Sasse appointment, saying things like, "Hey, Mike, come on!" "

Downey told me, "We're all worried about layoffs and there's a \$130,000 job being filled!"

He declared, "It's an unpleasant job to be a union leader today anyway, because your members hate you, the public hates you. It's probably one of the most thankless jobs one could have."

He said members blanch at, say, having to contribute to their health insurance and they blame the union for that. “Then I hear from everybody else all the power we have: ‘Nobody can MOVE without the UNION.’ ”

When I suggested that taxpayers pay a lot more for their health coverage than do state workers, Downey said, “And the public gets paid a lot more.”

Say hello to Downey, who followed his father and grandfather into a career as a plumber. You’ll be hearing from him and seeing him. He’s aggressive, though perhaps with less edge than some other labor leaders. He has a shock of gray hair. And, in a sea of union folks at the State House, he’s apt to be the only man without a tie, a legacy of his economic background and student days at La Salle Academy. “I felt a little poor.... We wore ties and stuff, and I always had one tie. I didn’t have lots of ties, and I think it turned me off from ties, having to wear it every day, so I’m not much for wearing them anymore.”

After La Salle, he went to plumbing school, a five-year program of work and classes.

Downey, of Irish heritage, lives now in Charlestown but grew up in Providence and Narragansett. One of his eighth-grade classmates at Msgr. Matthew F. Clarke Catholic School was Claudette Passeroni, whom he later married. Her father came from France, her mother from Colombia. The Downeys have three children: Corey, 30, and Faith, 28, who are schoolteachers, and Michael, 21, a URI junior.

Mrs. Downey is a clerk at URI, in a slot covered by the National Education Association. She used to be a URI cook’s helper, in her husband’s local, and, during a wave of layoffs and bumps years ago, found herself out of work for 18 months. “It was,” he says, “bad.”

Council 94, whose presidency Downey assumed in 2005, has about 8,500 members, of whom 5,000 work for the state. The state employees include secretaries, clerks, accountants, maintenance workers, environmental scientists, campus police, data entry operators, licensed practical nurses and others, and they are spread among several departments and many locations.

Downey works full-time on union business. The council and the URI local pay him a total of \$7,200 a year. In addition, the state continues to pay him the salary, about \$41,700, that he’d earn as a university plumber; by contract, he’s released from those duties so he can attend to union matters.

Does he miss his regular work? “Some days I would prefer to be on the plumbing truck,” he said. “It would be easier.”

He and several other plumbers would move around campus maintaining toilets, fixing leaks in pipes, and so on.

During his career, he also has done plumbing in houses, but he speaks most enthusiastically of his days as a plumber working with other tradespeople on construction projects like the Providence Marriott.

“It’s very satisfying to watch something go from dirt to a new big building,” he said. “And you’ll go by and say, ‘Oh, I worked in that building and I worked in this building.’ ”

Downey, a former Charlestown councilman, is a Democrat, but occasionally votes Republican. Once, he said, he went for Republican Ed DiPrete for governor. Also for Lincoln Chafee for Senate in 2000

over Democrat Bob Weygand, who is now a top administrator at URI. "I liked John Chafee," Downey said of Linc's late father, who preceded him to the Senate.

Rhode Island AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer George Nee, a labor bigwig, calls Downey "very rooted, very principled ... a good solid honest trade unionist."

How does Downey view the world?

Downey says, "I don't wake up thinking that management's going to help me, and I like getting my people organized so that we can do things together."

He says people in management are not his chums. "I don't have any friends that are management and I don't want to. I'm just a rank-and-file kind of person. I'm not out trying to hurt anybody. It's very difficult, actually, for me to talk about the governor because I have a great deal of respect for him, and even my own members tell me, 'Oh, you should say more, you should do this.' I say: He's the governor in the end. I disagree with a lot of his things and I have been outspoken, but I won't be rude."

Downey says he did not know Carcieri, from corporate America, before the Republican became governor. "He strikes me as not wanting to be around workers.... I think he feels uncomfortable around someone like me."

Downey adds, "I don't feel comfortable around him, but I don't have any hatred for him."

In fact, Downey played down a cartoon I showed him that Nee had passed along to me. (Nee said he didn't know where it came from.) It depicted Carcieri huddling with three figures in basketball garb, labeled Kass, DePetro and Yorke. Steve Kass, a former WPRO talk show host, is Carcieri's communications director. John DePetro and Dan Yorke host talk shows on the station; Carcieri is a regular guest. The uniform numbers of the characters are 6, 3 and 0. (WPRO is 630 on your dial.)

Above the drawing is this quote: "Don't worry guys.... I won't be laying you off."

Under the drawing is this caption: "The Last Remaining Members of Team Carcieri."

Downey said, "I'm not big on cartoons about the governor.... He deserves more respect than being made fun of in cartoons."

As we spoke at URI, Downey said of taxpayers who think state employees loaf and are overpaid, "I wish they would take a look at what's really happening, like go to the kitchens here.... The kids line up out the door and someone's feeding them, and it's those ladies who don't have a lot of help and they work very hard."

He said of the food, "Somebody's cooking it, somebody's delivering it." He said diners don't get sick, because the workers are pros. "They keep clean. They do a nice job."

As for state employee salaries — not benefits, but salaries — Downey asked of the critics, "Have they called an electrician or a plumber to their home lately?" He said plumbers at URI start at \$14 an hour, a fraction of what he said you could expect to pay at your home.

Downey's domain includes workers at URI's W. Alton Jones Campus, a gorgeous 2,300-acre nature retreat in West Greenwich. It's named for the Cities Service oil magnate who owned it and hosted

visits there from his pal, President Dwight D. Eisenhower. When Jones died, his widow donated the site to URI, which uses it as an environmental education center and camp. It also is available for conferences and functions.

I asked Downey if it ever occurs to him that this sprawling preserve once belonged to one person.

“Yeah, it does,” he replied. “There’s some wealthy people in the world,” he said and chuckles. “But I don’t represent them.”

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