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Program by New Jersey Union Grooms Candidates

By RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA

SADDLE BROOK, N.J. — Ballots cast throughout New Jersey on Tuesday will list hundreds of candidates, their parties and the offices they seek. But for 53 candidates, the ballots will not say one of the most important things they have in common: union-approved.

These people running for town councilman, mayor, county freeholder and other posts are graduates of a state A.F.L.-C.I.O. program to recruit, train and support candidates for public office who are union members or who support pro-union policies. The program, which costs the union about \$250,000 a year to run, has groomed more than 160 current officeholders — the overwhelming majority of them Democrats — including 8 members of the Legislature, 12 county freeholders, 18 mayors and a county clerk.

Many of these elected officials are not just members but leaders in their unions, like Stephen M. Sweeney, the president of the State Senate and a paid organizer for the ironworkers' union, and Senator Donald Norcross, an electrician who is the president of the Southern New Jersey Central Labor Council of the A.F.L.-C.I.O.

Union members are involved in political campaigns in every state and are often the ground troops for time-intensive tasks like walking precincts and making phone calls. But experts say that organized labor in other states has not been as focused on or as good at training its own members to run for office rather than work for other candidates. Similar boot-camp programs have been tried elsewhere, but none compare in size or success to New Jersey's, which began in 1997 and has grown steadily.

“The concept was to take our members and apprentice them in the field of politics, just as we apprentice them in their own crafts,” said Charles Wowkanech, the president of the state A.F.L.-C.I.O. “We started with zoning boards, school boards, councils, then mayor, freeholder, and then senators and assemblyman.”

“Corporate America is very good at electing their people,” Mr. Wowkanech said. “If it's good for them, why can't it be good for us?”

In New Jersey, five members of the Legislature are employees of their labor unions — Mr. Sweeney, Mr. Norcross and three Assembly Democrats: Thomas P. Giblin,

the business manager of an engineers' local; Joseph V. Egan, also a business manager of an electrical workers' local; and Wayne P. DeAngelo, the assistant business manager of another electrical workers' local. A 2007 study by the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#) found just nine lawmakers who worked for unions in the rest of the country. New Jersey has many more legislators who are union members, including one current shop steward, Assemblyman Nelson T. Albano of the United Food and Commercial Workers, and several former stewards or union officers.

At a Democratic campaign rally on Tuesday at the V.F.W. post in Saddle Brook, many of those scooping pasta from the buffet table were union members. Two of the candidates they were trying to help were members of the [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers](#) and graduates of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. program: James M. Carroll, a Bergen County freeholder running for re-election, and Joseph Setticase, a Saddle Brook councilman running for mayor. "Without my union and the support of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., I wouldn't be here," Mr. Carroll said. Even labor's political opponents expressed admiration for the effort. "The political parties supposedly try to do the same thing, to groom candidates from the grass roots, but the A.F.L.-C.I.O. does it more effectively," said Richard J. LaRossa, a Republican former state senator who leads a conservative policy group, [Solutions for New Jersey](#).

Mr. LaRossa and other critics contend that the unions' electoral success contributes to the high cost of government in New Jersey, a core issue in a state where Gov. [Chris Christie](#), a Republican, has clashed with labor and lawmakers over salaries, pensions, staffing and overlapping layers of government. "The labor agenda is pay more, build more, hire more, spend more," Mr. LaRossa said. Labor leaders, though, pointed out that most of the elected officials came from private-sector unions, particularly in the building trades — the electrical workers are especially well-represented — that are not always aligned with government-employee unions. Mr. Sweeney, for example, has had a rocky relationship with the New Jersey Education Association, the main teachers' union, which is the governor's favorite foil.

Still, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. program has been crucial in recent union victories in Trenton, including a law allowing government agencies to require even nonunion contractors to adhere to the terms of union contracts; one mandating paid family leave for many private-sector workers; and a "card check" provision making it possible for employees to unionize without elections.

“When I’m dealing with the public’s money, I’m going to make sure the public is treated fairly,” said Mr. Sweeney, who is also the leader of the Gloucester County Board of Freeholders. “Getting over on somebody like me is a lot more difficult than getting over on somebody who doesn’t know labor and doesn’t know contracts.” He conceded, however, that “when I was the chair of the labor committee, it was hard to be objective.”

To qualify for the state A.F.L.-C.I.O.’s program, candidates must first have the backing of their own union locals and their counties’ central labor councils. They attend a free two-day session at [Rutgers University](#), with classes taught by politicians and political consultants; Representative [Frank Pallone Jr.](#), a lawyer and a longtime labor ally, is often one of the instructors.

Dominick Stampone, the mayor of Haledon, in Passaic County, who belongs to the [American Federation of Teachers](#), said: “They talked about fund-raising, campaign finance reporting, dealing with the media, addressing a room, crafting your message, and also about the core values we believe in, like affordable health care and living wage requirements. They really covered all the bases.” Mr. Stampone completed the program last year when he was running unsuccessfully for county freeholder.

Once the school is over, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. gives novice candidates advice while they are running, pays for mailings to support them and arranges for volunteers to work on their campaigns.

Mr. Wowkanech of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. said the program began at a time when “organized labor was finding it very difficult to move its agenda, and all we were doing was testifying against the agenda that business and industry wanted.” In the years since, even as labor has increased its presence in elective office in New Jersey, union membership in the state has declined. Last year, 19.9 percent of the state’s work force was union-represented (compared with 13.6 percent nationally), down from 21.7 percent in 2000 (14.9 percent nationally). New Jersey ranks fifth in unionization; No. 1 is New York, at 27.2 percent.