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## Love him or hate him, hard to ignore him

'Living wage' fight brings both positive and negative attention to retail union chief Stuart Appelbaum.

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By [Daniel Massey](#)

**Published:** July 18, 2010 - 5:59 am

He doesn't boast the money, members or political might of some of New York's heaviest hitters in labor, but these days retail union President Stuart Appelbaum is creating a ruckus that belies his organization's size.

In December, he engineered the defeat of the Kingsbridge Armory redevelopment by demanding that all the retail jobs created by the project pay at least \$10 an hour, plus benefits—the only time a City Council land-use vote has gone against Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Mr. Appelbaum wasted little time after that in pushing a citywide living-wage bill that ticked off administration officials, developers and even some unions, which contend that it would be a job killer.

Last week, the bill got a boost when the powerful building workers union, 32BJ SEIU, threw its weight behind it.

The 57-year-old was the most vociferous union leader to call for Gov. David Paterson to step aside and clear the way for Andrew Cuomo to run for governor, again angering other unions, who would have preferred a more understated approach. And he was the first labor leader to back Mr. Cuomo, making headlines for his union, but simultaneously providing the gubernatorial hopeful with cover to unveil bold policy pronouncements that could hurt public-sector unions.

All that came after a fall election cycle in which Mr. Appelbaum confounded politicians and made himself persona non grata at City Hall when he flirted with endorsing Mr. Bloomberg, but ended up a gung-ho supporter of his rival, William Thompson, garnering plenty of ink and airtime.

### NO SUBTLETY

Most labor chiefs prefer to conduct their lobbying and advocacy behind closed doors, quietly building transactional relationships with elected officials, but subtlety is not Mr. Appelbaum's forte. The president of the 100,000-member Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union operates very much out in the open, skillfully making use of the press to inflate a power he otherwise lacks in terms of money or members. In 2009, the union donated just \$96,125 to candidates in local, state and federal races and to political committees. Its 45,000 members spread among various locals in the city lack the get-out-the-vote operation that makes candidates covet the endorsements of other unions.

"It seems like every time you open a newspaper or turn on a TV, you see him standing there with some Democratic leader," says Jack Kittle, political director of the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades DC 9, who was angered by Mr. Appelbaum's handling of Kingsbridge. "I don't know if he believes getting in the newspaper makes him an effective labor leader, but I'd prefer to see him out organizing in the stores."

The other unions don't disagree with the message Mr. Appelbaum spouts—that workers deserve to earn a wage that will let them live in the city—but they say his style often drives wedges between labor groups and can be counterproductive. His go-it-alone approach has sparked particular tension with the building trades, who were so angry after Mr. Appelbaum killed the Kingsbridge deal and the 1,000 union construction jobs that would have come with it that they've requested a meeting with his parent union, the United Food and Commercial Workers, to discuss potential changes to their support of local labor's anti-Walmart pact.

### CREATING A FIRESTORM

Mr. Appelbaum doesn't consider Kingsbridge a victory, but he says that, had the project proceeded, "we wouldn't be talking about living wage today."

Indeed, Mr. Appelbaum has succeeded in creating a public policy firestorm around living-wage mandates on publicly subsidized projects, upending an uneasy truce that had existed between developers, unions and activist groups in which they typically negotiated deals on a project-by-project basis. The mayor has repeatedly said that living-wage mandates for retail jobs would make projects economically unfeasible and stifle development. The ensuing commotion prompted the city to commission a \$1 million study on the feasibility of tying a

living wage to public projects.

Mr. Appelbaum's stand against "institutionalizing poverty" in the city was born out of a sense of justice, he says, that developed early in his life. His father was a postal clerk and his mother a file clerk. Neither was politically active, but Mr. Appelbaum developed a political consciousness by reading his father's union newspaper and attending synagogue. In his east midtown office, he displays his father's American Postal Workers Union card and a poster featuring a line from Deuteronomy: "Justice, justice shalt thou pursue." He holds up the framed print and says, "It's the moral imperative for what I do."

### **HOOKED ON ORGANIZING**

Shortly after graduating from Harvard Law School, he landed a job as chief counsel for the Democratic National Committee in Washington, D.C. There, he worked with various unions and got hooked on organized labor.

"I felt the real politics were the sort practiced by unions because they were truly looking to make a difference in people's lives," he says. "With electoral politics, it wasn't value-driven, but more about people trying to achieve positions."

He joined RWDSU as special projects coordinator and rose through the ranks to become secretary treasurer and, in 1998, president. A year ago, Mr. Appelbaum announced that he is gay, a fact he made public so that he could speak out in favor of marriage equality legislation.

He commands a union in an industry that is notoriously difficult to organize because of its low profit margin and high worker turnover. And so a citywide living-wage mandate is perhaps his best chance at raising the floor for retail workers, 44% of whom earn less than \$10 an hour, according to the Fiscal Policy Institute. Under Mr. Appelbaum, RWDSU has added about 25,000 new members—including some 1,400 Filene's Basement workers who signed up with the union last week—but that's been just enough to make up for losses as traditional, unionized department stores have consolidated or shut down.

To help with organizing, he's formed strategic alliances with various community groups. Mr. Appelbaum's Retail Action Project has won small, but significant victories—like organizing workers at the Yellow Rat Bastard retail chain and securing millions in unpaid wages for retail workers across the city.

### **NEW ALLIANCES**

"He's created a new paradigm for organizing by forging deep partnerships with community organizations and investing in those relationships," says Andrew Friedman, executive director of Make the Road New York, one of RWDSU's community partners.

And he's formed an alliance with Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr., whose strong stance in favor of living wages was instrumental in swinging the Kingsbridge vote and in raising his profile for a potential 2013 run for City Hall.

"Stu's ideas and visions are not myopic," Mr. Diaz says. "They're long-term and expand beyond just retail workers. He truly wants a better future for all New Yorkers."

Few would doubt that. But the question remains: Will he be able to parlay the attention to living wage into tangible gains for his members and other retail workers? Or has he isolated himself to the point where his biggest "victory" could end up being the defeat of Kingsbridge?

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