

Contractors Divided Over Day Laborers

Long Island's Economy And Culture Shape Views

By MICHELLE GARCIA
Washington Post Staff Writer

FREEPORT, N.Y. — The green pickup truck accented with stickers of yellow ribbons and U.S. flags belongs to Robert Stokes. A few yards away in the Home Depot parking lot, Tom Lippolt stretches out in his shiny, white pickup.

Both are contractors, in their forties, married, with homes near the ocean and annual incomes of \$120,000. They both grew up in suburban Long Island. But they hold very different views of the day laborers who wait for contractors like them to cruise through the parking lot and offer them a day's wage.

"I wouldn't hire anyone," Stokes says as he loads tools into his truck. "They don't pay taxes." He doesn't buy the argument that immigrants do work that native-born Americans won't.

"I get people calling all the time — someone gets laid off, they need work," says Stokes, who has 20 years' experience under his contractor's belt. He limits work hires to friends and family. "How can you bring someone you don't know into someone else's home?"

In his pickup, Lippolt casts his blue eyes toward the waiting day laborers.

"They're filling in the gaps," he says. "It seems like all the kids want to be stockbrokers. We don't have young people coming in to fill these places, all these trade jobs."

When Stokes and Lippolt were growing up, Long Island was anchored by a mix of blue-collar white men like them and mid-level professionals. Their families were part of the post-World War II exodus from the city, chasing the dream of suburban life.

But the heart of Long Island is different now. "The economy has changed, and industry is not what it once was. Education levels have gone up, particularly in the white community," said Bruce Katz, director of the metropolitan policy program at the Brookings Institution.

White men on Long Island in the financial and banking industries outnumber those in construction and the trades by 3 to 1, according to a recent Census study. And the blue-collar work has browned. Spanish-speaking immigrants — legal and illegal — now take on manual labor jobs. But if they are needed, they are not always welcome.

For years, many people in middle-class neighborhoods such as the ones that Stokes and Lippolt live in complained about men living in overcrowded housing, or loitering at doughnut shops and convenience stores as they waited for work. Six years ago, two men posed as contractors and beat their hired hands with shovels. A few years later, five teenagers firebombed a Mexican family's home.

Lippolt and Stokes could easily represent the two sides of an argument over illegal immigration.



Day laborers gather in a Home Depot parking lot in Freeport, N.Y., waiting for work. The construction business on Long Island, once dominated by local whites, now relies heavily on Hispanic immigrants.

The construction industry is heavily dependent on immigrant labor. But, as is often the case with contentious issues, their differing stands stem more from circumstance than ideology.

"Things are working" in his world, Stokes said. He has a ready supply of family and friends who work with him. His son joined the business, and many of his friends still strap on a tool belt every day. He has little need, and less desire, to hire illegal immigrants, or any day laborers, for that matter.

By contrast, Lippolt has a hard time finding workers, even among family members. His subcontractors — the middlemen between him and the laborers — hire day laborers. He says the shortage of locals entering the trades drives up labor costs, creating a need for day laborers. He asks: "Are you gonna pay me thousands of dollars more" to not use day laborers?

Economics aside, Lippolt and Stokes form their views on immigration and illegal workers by their feelings about the security of their work, their place in the Long Island pecking order.

Many of Lippolt's clients live in estate homes and reap the rewards of the financial world. There, Lippolt is viewed as the guy who didn't go to college. Often, he says, they seem to see little difference between him and an immigrant day laborer.

"I can see the reaction, the lack of respect, if you come to their houses," Lippolt says with a sigh. "You're definitely looked down upon, especially on Long Island. You're looked upon as a day laborer to these people, as their servants."

Lippolt says he feels like part of a "dying breed." Even his relatives show little interest in carrying on his work. He once took his son Logan, 13, to a job site. "He doesn't want to sweep up," Lippolt says, bowing in disappointment. "He wants to be a snowboarder." Still, he urges Logan to consider the trades as "something to fall back on."

Rain and a cold wind blow in. The day laborers never budge from their spots in the parking lot. Lippolt keeps his eyes trained on them, and after a long silence he says he worries about "the direction of the country" when native-born Americans don't want to do the backbreaking work.

But he's beginning to adapt to the changes brought by immigration, including the increased competition from new Hispanic contractors. He bought a few tapes to learn Spanish, to better compete with them for the best workers.

"It's easier for them," Lippolt says. "They can get the cream of the crop."

Stokes glides down the winding roads of suburbia with its low-slung buildings and small, wooded estates. An outdoorsman at heart, he keeps a canoe stowed in the back of his truck for afternoon getaways.

"I have yet to do a job that the client did not appreciate what we did," he says. "They don't have the impression that I'm less professional than anyone else."

Still, attitudes about the blue collar have "evolved," Stokes acknowledges, and sometimes the reminders hit close to home. "My wife yells at me; she doesn't want me doing it. She says, 'You're so smart,'" he says. "She thinks I'm wasting my abilities."

He pulls up by a split-level house that's stripped to its framework bones. Stokes's son, Robert Jr., 21, installs hand-cut tiles in what will be a bathroom. A nephew works on the living room walls.

They handle the general tasks; he's the "trim guy," a specialist in moldings and woodwork. The best part about hiring family and close friends is not having to worry that they will run off with tools or slack off on the job, he says.

And if he didn't have nine brothers and sisters and a posse of nephews to staff the jobs? "I would do smaller jobs. I would rather work by myself," than hire a day laborer, he says.

But he concedes that the industry has suffered losses. His solution: Bring back vocational training in high schools; don't bring in temporary workers. He opposes the idea of creating a "subclass of humans" and antithetical to the American way.

"These people should be able to come here legally and build themselves up," he says, adding that if workers are needed, the country should "change the laws to let them work legally." That means Long Island will look different, he says, and people don't like change.

Lieberman May Run as Independent

By SHAILAGH MURRAY
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Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (Conn.), the Democratic Party's 2000 vice presidential nominee and a leading voice of its centrist wing, announced yesterday that he will run as an independent in the November general election if he loses a primary battle next month to an increasingly popular antiwar candidate.

Lieberman, who not long ago appeared to be coasting to easy reelection with strong bipartisan support, now faces a potentially career-ending challenge from Greenwich millionaire Ned Lamont. The challenger has climbed in recent polls by tapping support from Connecticut liberals and others who recoil at Lieberman's strong support for the Iraq war.

A Quinnipiac University survey conducted in early June showed Lamont gaining ground against Lieberman. Among all Democrats, Lieberman led Lamont 57 percent to 32 percent, compared with 65 percent to 19 percent in a Quinnipiac poll taken a month earlier.

The margin was slimmer among likely Democratic primary voters, including undecided voters who are leaning toward a candidate, with Lamont trailing the incumbent 55 percent to 40 percent, the June poll found.

As his lead narrows, Lieberman has weighed an alternative option: collecting 7,500 voter signatures to secure a place on the November ballot as an independent. But the due date for that option is Aug. 9, one day after the primary — meaning that Lieberman must begin collecting signatures well before he knows the outcome against Lamont.

Lieberman said that his bid had no bearing on his party affiliation and that he would present himself as a "petitioning Democrat" rather than an independent, although that is how he would be listed on the ballot.

"I have been a proud, loyal and progressive Democrat since John F. Kennedy inspired my generation of Americans into public service," Lieberman said yesterday on the steps of the state Capitol in

Hartford. "And I will stay a Democrat."

Although Lieberman said he remains confident that he will beat Lamont, two wild cards make him and his supporters exceedingly nervous.

One is that the primary will take place in early August, when many voters may be on vacation. A low turnout could draw a disproportionate share of highly motivated Lamont supporters. Lieberman predicted that turnout could be as low as 25 percent.

The other factor is Lamont's wealth, amassed from a cable-television business he founded. "What if my opponent, who says he is worth somewhere between \$90 [million] and \$300 million, decides to write bigger and bigger checks in the last weeks of the campaign?" asked Lieberman, addressing his supporters.

Democratic leaders, including Senate Minority Leader Harry M. Reid (Nev.), spoke to Lieberman yesterday morning and said they will continue to back him in the August contest.

"Harry Reid, Chuck Schumer and the DSCC are supporting Joe Lieberman in the primary," said Phil Singer, spokesman for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee and its chairman, Sen. Charles E. Schumer (N.Y.). "We aren't going to speculate about what happens next because that would undermine our candidate."

But senior Democratic sources acknowledged that Lieberman had placed his party in a difficult position by potentially throwing into chaos a Senate race that Democrats had long assumed they would easily win.

Last month's Quinnipiac poll found that Lieberman would have the clear advantage in November. He would easily defeat Republican Alan Schlesinger, 68 percent to 14 percent, while Lamont would lead Schlesinger 37 percent to 20 percent, with 34 percent undecided. Running as an independent, Lieberman would win 56 percent of support, compared with 18 percent for Lamont and 8 percent for Schlesinger.

Lamont, who will debate Lieberman on Thursday night in Hartford, said his opponent's move shows a lack of respect for Democratic voters.

"We are confident that the voters in November will find in our campaign a positive voice for the change in Washington that we all deserve," Lamont said in a statement.

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