

“A Burning Hatred for the Ruling Class”: Frank Barbaro’s Radical Life, from the
(Brooklyn) Docks to the (New York) Supreme Court

By George De Stefano

Frank Barbaro, born in 1927 in Brooklyn, New York to immigrant parents from Sicily and Calabria, is one of the last living links to a milieu that has been called “the lost world of Italian American radicalism.”¹

Barbaro was radicalized by the injustices he witnessed and directly experienced as a young man, and especially by his years as a longshoreman working on the notorious, gangster-infested Brooklyn docks. Though he was close to the Communist Party USA and belonged to one of its affiliated youth organizations, he, like many other leftists of his generation, pursued his political goals through the Democratic Party. Like his hero Vito Marcantonio, the U.S. Congressman from East Harlem, Barbaro achieved considerable success in electoral politics without diluting his radicalism. He represented his Brooklyn district in the New York State Assembly for 26 years, where he chaired the Committee on Labor. After leaving the legislature, he was elected to the New York State Supreme Court, serving until he reached the age of seventy-five. Now 80, Barbaro, though largely retired, occasionally practices law, taking cases that have political import.

In April 2007, he represented several anti-Iraq war protestors arrested the previous October for criminal trespassing in the district office of Representative Vito Fossella, a conservative Republican and supporter of the war. (When Fossella declined their request to meet with them, they refused to leave his office and were arrested.) Barbaro planned a political

defense that would portray Fossella as an intransigent supporter of an illegitimate conflict that violated international law. The protestors, Barbaro planned to argue, had a right to demand that their representative hear their grievances.

But on the morning the case was to go to court, Fossella dropped all charges against the defendants.

I met Barbaro, in a Brooklyn diner popular with defense attorneys and prosecutors; right after the case had been dismissed. He had driven to the borough that morning from his home in upstate New York. He and the defendants were disappointed that they would not have their day in court.

“What I think happened was that the Republicans and Fossella sat down and said we don’t need this headache. So they dismissed the entire case,” Barbaro remarked.

This was not Barbaro’s first challenge to Fossella; in 2004, he ran against the Republican congressman. Although Fossella was re-elected, Barbaro won 43 percent of the vote and actually defeated the incumbent in the Brooklyn section of the district. (The 13th Congressional district also comprises all of Staten Island, a reliably Republican enclave.) Despite having retired and moved away from his old turf, Barbaro still commanded enough support to run a competitive race against the right-wing Republican.

Barbaro at eighty years old remains a committed, even passionate radical. A big man, over six feet tall and barrel-chested, he retains the imposing physical presence and no-nonsense demeanor that stood him well when he was a militant longshoreman confronting the violent dangers of the Brooklyn waterfront. In several interviews conducted during early 2007, Barbaro

recalled milestones from his radical life, beginning with his childhood in what is now the Carroll Gardens section of Brooklyn.

“My mother was a peasant from Sicily, my father a fisherman from Calabria,” he said. “Both came here at a very young age. My mother worked as a laundress, and then became a garment worker. My father learned to be a butcher from a German, who made him an apprentice. They met in New York and got married. I learned a lot of my values from observing my parents.”

“From my father, I developed a belief that helping people is the right thing to do. As a butcher, he always said, ‘you don’t cheat, you give people the right weight and good quality meat and they’ll come back to you.’ So that taught me honesty. Plus he was an excellent butcher, which taught me to be the best you can at whatever you do.”

Barbaro said his mother told him stories about Sicilian resistance to the island’s French occupiers. “From her I learned about colonialism and national liberation. So when I went to school and heard about these things, it connected for me.”

Both parents believed strongly in education and wanted him to go to college. In 1952, after a stint in the Navy, he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology at New York University. His activism began then, during the early years of the Cold War. On the eve of the Korean War, he went to an anti-war demonstration in Manhattan. “As soon as we came out of subway, police on horseback charged at us, and the police beat the demonstrators,” he recalled. “That was beginning of my radicalization.”

Barbaro studied Marxism at the Communist Party’s Jefferson School and joined the party-affiliated Labor Youth League.² His tenant activism began while he was in the LYL, with

a campaign against racial discrimination by Stuyvesant Town, a middle class housing development owned by Metropolitan Life Insurance.

Tenant advocates, including members of the Communist Party, formed the Tenant Committee to End Discrimination at Stuyvesant Town and challenged Met Life's whites-only policies. Residents would sub-let their apartments to black families, or would permit blacks to stay in their apartments while they were away on vacation or work. The development's management responded by issuing orders of eviction. The tenant advocates would try to obstruct the evictions by, among other tactics, sitting on furniture as marshals attempted to remove it. These efforts failed, and the black families were evicted. This experience drove home to Barbaro the brutality of American racism and made him a lifelong foe of racial injustice.³

In 1953, the LYL offered him the choice of three proletarian occupations: coal miner, steelworker, or longshoreman. "I said, 'I'll do whatever you want.' So they assigned me to be a longshoreman." Barbaro, who was married and had two children, hoped to use the job to finance a master's degree in psychiatric social work. But instead he spent 15 years on the docks, an experience that he said served as "the foundry of my ideology."

"My parents' lessons, their values and beliefs, were the iron ore," which was tempered and made strong in the cauldron of his ideological studies. "But working with longshoreman I developed a love for and a respect for working people, an admiration for them. The oppression they experienced was terrible. I developed a hate, a burning hatred for the ruling class."

The brutal exploitation of the longshoremen -- who at this time were mostly Italian Americans -- often has been likened to feudalism, and certainly the workers were treated like serfs. The harsh working conditions on the waterfront included the infamous "shape-up" hiring

system. The playwright Arthur Miller, in his autobiography *Timebends*, described how the shape-up functioned:

“In Red Hook, Brooklyn, at four-thirty on winter mornings, I stood around with longshoremen huddling in doorways in rain and snow...facing the piers, waiting for the hiring boss, on whose arrival they surged forward and formed up in a semicircle to attract his pointing finger and the numbered brass checks that guaranteed a job for the day.”⁴

Scenes such as Miller observed, and that Barbaro experienced, attest to the historian William Mello’s observation that “longshoremen were at the lowest level of the American working class.” The International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA), a corrupt, mob-controlled union with close ties to politicians, “assumed the characteristics of a supplier of labor and administrator of the work process rather than a defender of the exploited workplace.”⁵

ILA officials “bullied workers to ensure their union’s monopoly over recruitment. They bribed shipping and stevedoring company managers to ensure a monopoly over the work that was available. Political protection was assured through the City Democratic Club founded in the late 1920s – it was little more than a mob front. Smuggling, robbery, and extortion were endemic.”⁶

In 1939, a longshoreman who organized workers to challenge the system, an Italian immigrant radical named Peter Panto, was kidnapped and murdered by gangsters.⁷

Little had changed when Frank Barbaro went to work on the docks 14 years later. Describing working conditions on the waterfront, he said, “One experience sums it all up.”

“We were working one day in an area loading cement bags. They were coming down right over our heads, 100-pound bags of cement. It was unsafe because the palettes holding the

bags were weak. One day they collapsed, and all those bags came crashing down. It was a miracle none of us got killed.”

“So I said okay, we stop work. The bosses came and they said what’s the problem and we told them. Then they gave us the double palettes. The next day at the shape-up, when I went in, my boss said ‘you don’t work here anymore.’”

But there were about 100 longshoremen there that morning, and when they found out what the boss had said to Barbaro, they all walked off the job.

“They said if Red doesn’t work we don’t work,” he recalled. (Barbaro said, with a hint of a grin, that the nickname “Red” referred to his hair color at the time.)

“Can you imagine the effect that had on me?” he remarked of that distant event, which still stirs deep emotion.

“I really learned how to organize there. We used to work like animals. The water we drank came in an open bucket. When the water came down into the hold it was full of dead insects and straw and what have you. When you wanted to drink you had to push this stuff away. And we never had a coffee break. So I organized against this. There were five hatches on a ship. I went to number 5 hatch and said the guys in #1 are having a meeting are you with us? They’d say yes. Then I’d go to #1 hatch and say the guys in #5 are having a meeting, are you with us? And so on down the line.

“Before long we had a pier committee. And demands. I insisted we meet in front of the pier so the bosses could see what we were doing. So after a couple of meetings the shop steward, who was in the hands of the bosses, said what do you guys want? We said we want clean water and a coffee break. When we were working, at about 10 o’clock they’d send the coffee we

purchased ourselves and we would stop working. Before that you had to work with one hand and eat with the other. So we won these two victories.

“Later I went to another pier that was really under the control of a mob guy. We were having a meeting and the shop steward comes over and says, ‘It’s not nice what you’re doing.’ That was a veiled threat. His father in law was one of these wise guys. What I immediately thought was I have to show these workers not to be afraid. I said, ‘Go fuck yourself. Whaddya gonna do, kill me?’ He didn’t know what to say. That put him in his place. I ended up with my tires slashed and the windshield broken on my car. But that’s the way it was on the Brooklyn docks.”

Organizing a rank and file movement of longshoreman included distributing a newspaper called Dockers News. “We were small in number,” Barbaro said, but the union [the ILA] was terrified of us because we used to put out this paper that would put forth the workers’ demands. We were doing this during the McCarthy era and we had to be underground. We had safe houses where we mimeographed it.”⁸

Barbaro believes that the story of the Brooklyn docks has yet to be accurately told. “Somebody’s gotta write the truth, about the relationship of forces and what really happened on the piers,” he says. He reserves particular distaste for the film, “On the Waterfront,” which he criticizes for reducing a labor struggle waged by a movement to a confrontation between a punch-drunk ex-boxer (Terry Malloy, played by Marlon Brando) and a mobster union boss (Johnny Friendly, played by Lee J. Cobb). “The movie totally eliminated the class character of the struggle and the courageousness of the workers. It became one man’s fight against a gangster, not a system.”

By 1962, Barbaro felt that conditions had sufficiently improved on the docks for him to pursue his dream of becoming an attorney. He enrolled in evening classes at the Brooklyn Law School and in 1966 graduated as president of his class. During the day he continued to work as a longshoreman.

“One of my friends would take over from me so I could go to school at night. I had to undress in the car, put clean clothes on, go into the men’s room and wash my face. For four years, it was like that – work and then law school. I went to school five nights a week and studied all weekend. I was always exhausted. I had a job running a winch and on my hour off I’d go into the crew’s dining room and go to sleep. I’d hear workers say, ‘Shhh, Red is sleeping.’ They knew what I was doing and were looking out for me, pulling for me.”

In 1968, as the Vietnam War raged, Barbaro ran for the New York State Assembly as a peace candidate. “We knew nothing and had no money, but we got a respectable vote, 30 percent.” He ran again two years later and again lost. But his tenants’ rights legal advocacy began during this time. Jane Benedict, a Communist Party member who headed the Met Council on Housing, taught him about housing issues and referred him to two left-wing attorneys who represented tenants in court cases.⁹

Existing law, however, did not offer much succor to tenants. “The only thing you could really do was tie up the courts so evictions couldn’t proceed,” Barbaro said. “So we would challenge the serving of a summons on a tenant, saying it was improper. That means you gotta have a separate hearing to determine if service was properly made. Then after that’s decided, you would go to trial. So on one case we would tie up the court for three or four days. Initially they

came down hard on us but we stuck with this strategy. Then eventually the judges began to tell the landlords you're not getting your money unless you make repairs."

In 1972, Barbaro ran for the state Assembly and won.

"Now I had an income from the Assembly," he said. "I opened a community office in Bensonhurst and provided free legal services. Mostly tenants' issues. We organized; we used to hang bed sheets from windows saying 'this building is on rent strike.' One landlord said he'd never give in. We found out where he lived on Park Avenue and we went there." After a noisy protest by the tenants, some of who brought mice and cockroaches they'd trapped in the building, the landlord relented and provided adequate heat and other services.

"Everyone knew I would make waves in the Assembly," Barbaro said. "I went into the legislature as an activist." Though tenants' issues ranked high on his agenda, they weren't his only concern. "We developed a real issue-based coalition," he notes. "Remember, I was representing Bensonhurst, which was very conservative. I was against the death penalty, against the Vietnam War, I was for gay rights, and I was pro-choice. One day I said to a guy from my district, 'Larry, tell me the truth -- what do people in the district think of me?' He said, 'Frank, they think you got crazy ideas but they like you because you're there when they need you.'"

Barbaro served as chairman of the Assembly's Committee on Government Employees for two years. Then he became chairman of the Labor Committee. "I was in my element there. We passed more pro-labor legislation than under any chair of the Labor Committee in the history of the Assembly," he stated with obvious pride. "Legislation to protect whistleblowers, on health and safety, asbestos, workers compensation."

His satisfaction with the Labor Committee chairmanship notwithstanding, Barbaro in 1981 decided to challenge Mayor Ed Koch in that year's Democratic primary. Two of the city's most prominent liberals, labor attorney and mediator Theodore Kheel and journalist Jack Newfield, urged him to run against Koch, a one-time reformer from Greenwich Village who had turned to the right.

"No one else wanted to do it. Everyone was afraid of Koch," Barbaro said.

Barbaro knew he couldn't defeat Koch but he believed he could "raise issues that would never have been raised if I hadn't run."

"I ran on a pro-labor, anti-racist platform," he said. "I raised issues like stopping gentrification, and opposing tax abatements for luxury developers, which Koch favored. I advocated building low-cost housing for working people."

"We had no money," he recalls. "We spent about \$250,000 for a mayoral campaign. But we had a campaign that was just as good as if we'd spent a few million. Wherever we went, grassroots groups sprung up. We had thousands of volunteers working under our organization and working on their own."

Despite Barbaro's demonstrated commitment to labor issues, his campaign did not receive unanimous support from New York's labor leaders. His outreach began auspiciously, at a meeting with Harry Van Arsdale, the head of the New York City Central Labor Council. "I went to see him," Barbaro said, "and he took me into a conference room with this 20-foot-long table and began talking about labor issues. Then all of a sudden he looked at me and said, 'You don't want to change our form of government, do you?' I said, 'No Harry, I just want to make it fair.' He had an apple and he handed it to me and said, 'You go to it.'"

Van Arsdale decided that the Central Labor Council should endorse Barbaro's candidacy, despite its policy against such endorsements. He contacted other labor leaders to persuade them to support Barbaro. When Van Arsdale encountered opposition from two prominent labor chiefs, Albert Shanker of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and Victor Gotbaum, president of the municipal workers' union District Council 37, Barbaro met with the two powerful leaders. "They told me, 'you can't win and you're going to get Koch angry at us.' In fact, Shanker said, 'if there is an attempt in the UFT to form a rank and file group for you, I will stop it.'"¹⁰

Gotbaum and Shanker weren't the only powerbrokers unsettled by Barbaro's campaign. At a meeting with the editorial board of the *New York Times*, he said that as mayor he would not enter into salary negotiations with city unions "in a confrontational mode." Instead he would invite labor leaders to a meeting at which he would "open our books and say, this is what we have, now let's see how we can give wage increases. I wouldn't hide how much the City had. Well, they were absolutely shocked I would suggest such an idea."

Nor was the *Times* board enamored of Barbaro's plan to invest public employee pension funds in the construction of affordable housing and schools in New York "instead of having investment bankers use the money and invest it all over the country, many times in non- or anti-union companies or violators of health and safety laws, and in companies dealing with South Africa."

Ed Koch would go on to win the Democratic primary and the general election. Barbaro, who remained in the race after the primary, running as an independent, came in a distant second.

Barbaro has no regrets about his primary challenge to Koch, who he said had forsaken his earlier liberal principles to become an "arch-reactionary."

“The know-it-alls said I would get 20 percent of the vote, and I got 36 percent, which astounded a lot of people. We spent a pittance and Koch spent several million. We had no money for TV to get our message out. But wherever I went and wherever I spoke, the response was overwhelmingly positive.”

Barbaro fondly recalled an appearance in Harlem as a highlight of the campaign. Jim Butler, the African American president of Hospital Workers Local 420, offered to escort him through the crowds at Harlem Day, a major community event. “The first people we encountered were a group of Rastafarians and they began heckling me. And I just let it all hang out, I raised all the issues relevant to working people, housing, education, jobs, I went through the whole litany and said, that’s what I stand for, that’s why I’m running. And when I got through they hugged me and said man you’re for real, we’re gonna support you. Jim Butler said I shouldn’t run for mayor, I should be a preacher. I walked through 125th Street with tremendous positive reaction. And we won every black and Latino district in the city.”

But on the evening of August 23, 1989, Barbaro’s mainly Italian American district became the site of an atrocious racial crime that would roil the entire city. Yusuf Hawkins, a black teenager, had gone to Bensonhurst to inquire about a used car that was for sale. A group of young men, mostly Italian Americans, some of them wielding baseball bats, confronted Hawkins and his three black friends. One of the youths shot Hawkins twice in the chest, killing him.

In the aftermath of the incident, the African American activist minister Al Sharpton led a series of protest marches through Bensonhurst. Four such marches occurred within two weeks of Hawkins’ killing. The first, held just a few days after the crime, was greeted by neighborhood residents shouting, “Niggers go home” and “Long Live South Africa.” Some bared their buttocks

and brandished watermelons to mock the marchers. These scenes, reported by media worldwide, helped foster an image of Bensonhurst as an enclave of virulent, violent racism.

Barbaro worked to ensure that such ugly incidents would not occur during the subsequent protests. He believed “it was important to educate the local people that the Hawkins killing was a lynching, and that the marchers had a right to march.”

“We had to make sure that their right to march was ensured and that we’re not made to look like a bunch of racists. So we went out in the streets, among a group of kids that were hanging out and talked to them. I would say, ‘I’m giving you a field commission -- you’re a captain. Your job is to walk along, follow the march, and if anybody starts being violent, calm them down.’”

When Sharpton led a march in May 1990 to protest the acquittal on murder charges of one of the Hawkins defendants, it became evident that the efforts of Barbaro and other community leaders had paid off. Instead of loud racial invective, the marchers were met by silence and empty streets. Barbaro and other community leaders walked beside the marchers and urged the few local residents on the streets to go inside.

“We shouldn't allow 15, 20 or 30 people to paint Bensonhurst as a racist community," Barbaro told a *New York Times* reporter. "So we're telling them don't allow yourselves to be painted like this.”¹¹

Barbaro indisputably played a positive role in the searing racial drama unleashed by the murder of Yusuf Hawkins. He took a brave and principled stand in publicly calling the murder a lynching and by insisting that Sharpton and his followers had a right to protest in Bensonhurst. He, and community leaders such as Jack Spatula, president of the Federation of Italian-American

Organizations of Brooklyn, as well as some local clergymen, sought to calm tensions and promote racial reconciliation.

"I think we're beyond the type of confrontational demonstration that people are talking about," he told the *New York Times* after the second protest march. "It is clear to me that the overwhelming majority of the people in the black and white communities want an end to the violence, want reconciliation and want the causes of this violence addressed by the city and state government."¹²

But Al Sharpton had another view: to him, Barbaro and other local leaders were more concerned with peace than justice. "Why didn't the elected officials in this community tell people to come forward and give information about the killings?" he commented.¹³ He also criticized Bensonhurst's leaders for not joining the protest marches.

Barbaro believed it would have been a mistake to join Sharpton and the marchers. "It was my feeling that I was part of the [Bensonhurst] community, and that the entire community was being attacked unfairly. If I marched I couldn't work with the people in the community, they wouldn't have anything to do with me and would see me as a traitor. So I felt it would be more constructive for me not to march but to guarantee that Sharpton and marchers had the right to march, and to educate the local people that the killing was a lynching."

But was Bensonhurst unfairly attacked? It is true that in the wake of the Hawkins killing the media portrayed the community in a harsh light. There certainly was condescension towards the neighborhood's Italian American residents, and even bigotry, in some of the commentary. Liberal journalist Pete Hamill, for example, contemptuously described Bensonhurst youths as "guidos" in his *New York Post* column.

Barbaro objected when civil liberties advocate Norman Siegel called Bensonhurst a “hotbed” of racism. “It wasn’t,” said Barbaro. “I’m not saying there weren’t racists in Bensonhurst. I’m saying Bensonhurst is no different from any other neighborhood. Racism permeates our society.”

But this evades the fact that racism, rather than being a problem of a few watermelon-waving bigots, was endemic in Bensonhurst. Anti-black sentiment was virulent and widespread, and it was manifested in concrete ways, including housing discrimination. As an Italian American Bensonhurst resident told me shortly after the Hawkins murder, “You could be a doctor or a lawyer but if you’re black you won’t get within a mile of owning a house in this neighborhood.”¹⁴

Moreover, the murder of Yusuf Hawkins hardly was the only instance of Italian-on-black violence to occur in New York. Hawkins’ killing was preceded by two other notorious hate crimes. In 1982, a black subway worker named Willie Turks was dragged from his car and beaten to death by several Italian American males in the Gravesend section of Brooklyn. In 1986, a group of mainly Italian American youths attacked four black men in Howard Beach, Queens, resulting in the death of one, 23-year-old Michael Griffith.

In 1990, revulsion over racial violence helped elect David Dinkins as the first African American mayor of New York. (Dinkins called the multi-ethnic coalition that elected him a “gorgeous mosaic.”) “I called Mayor Dinkins and urged him to support a city-wide coalition against racial violence,” recalled Barbaro. “The idea was to organize black people, Asians, Jews, Latinos, and whites in community groups so that if there was a [bias] incident there’d be an organization in place. Dinkins said he liked the idea. Mark Bavaro [of the New York Giants] and

Harry Belafonte would be the co-chairs, but it never happened. There was a lot of talk. Belafonte came to Bensonhurst and spoke. That was helpful. We had small meetings, in restaurants and other places, and we calmed the situation.”

Frank Barbaro can be faulted for downplaying the extent of racial bigotry in his district. But his efforts after the murder of Yusuf Hawkins (as well as his prior history of opposing racism) distinguished him from other Italian American leaders who, as Joseph Sciorra has commented, “did a horrendous job of speaking clearly and repeatedly against racism...”¹⁵

Barbaro’s tenure in the Assembly ended in 1996. Two years earlier, he had been removed as chair of the Labor Committee after a dispute with then-Speaker Saul Weprin over the legal status of livery drivers.¹⁶ After leaving the legislature, he was elected to the New York State Supreme Court, where he served six years. His time on the bench was somewhat anti-climactic after the Assembly, and certainly compared with his early years as an activist. But he remained a maverick who espoused a left-of-center judicial philosophy.

“I determined that I would make sure that any person who came before me would get the full spectrum of the rights afforded to defendants and that the burden was on the prosecution to prove its case,” he said. “One time there was a young assistant district attorney who was unhappy with me. I called him up and said ‘young man, you and I are not partners. I’m not here to help you convict this man. I’m here to make sure this man gets justice.’ He thought I was crazy.”

Barbaro’s approach to jury selection also differed from that of other judges. “The typical approach was to lecture prospective jurors about how serving was a patriotic duty akin to military service,” he said. “I gave them a different charge. I would say, there was a time when black people, women, working people all were excluded, in short only the rich landed gentry got

on juries. So when someone went to trial they were not being tried by their peers, and that was a terribly unfair system. A lot of people went to jail and even died to get us to a place where people like you are now prospective jurors. So you are living proof of the development of democracy in America and you have a heavy burden to make sure this person gets a fair trial.’ No other judge said anything like that.”

“I enjoyed it but I began to see all I was doing was the job of the ruling class. These poor people were coming in for selling drugs. There was no program for them in the prisons. No training programs. They would come out with no education, no training, and they’d be back selling drugs again. So I said, ‘I don’t really want to be part of this anymore.’”

Barbaro could have served on the bench until he was 76, but he retired after six years, when he was seventy-five.

Today Frank Barbaro lives in Watervliet, a small town near Albany founded by Dutch settlers. He remarked that although Bensonhurst’s Italian-American population has dwindled, he and his wife left because his old district had become overdeveloped. “Developers came in and tore down one- and two- family houses to build big condos and now it’s overcrowded, the congestion is horrific.”

Barbaro remains interested in politics, having run for office as recently as 2004. Of the race against Vito Fossella, he says, “My idea was to go to Congress for one term, and prime somebody to take over after me. I would say, ‘All I want is Vito Marcantonio’s office.’ Two years later, another candidate ran, a middle of the road Clinton type guy, and he got 45 percent of the vote with no money and no labor support. That tells you the opportunity there was to take that seat.”

Barbaro said he continues to be inspired by Marcantonio, who died too young a half-century ago. “Fiorello La Guardia developed Vito as his protégé,” Barbaro noted. “And Vito followed La Guardia’s progressive policies. He was opposed to the Cold War and McCarthyism and was pro-labor. When I was growing up he was my hero. When he spoke his words resonated, reminding me of what my parents had told me.”

In 2000, Barbaro attended a commemoration of Marcantonio’s life held by Fieri, an organization of young Italian American professionals. “They reached out and somehow they got all the old lefties to come, as well as young people, for this tribute to Vito. In effect, their message was, you don’t have to agree with Vito Marcantonio but you cannot deny he was a man of principle who couldn’t be bought and fought for what he believed in. And that is a message that we Italian Americans should carry with us, to be true to what we believe and fight for our principles.”

It certainly is a message Frank Barbaro has heeded. But what of his legacy? Barbaro’s career demonstrates that a radical operating within a system designed to thwart radicalism can achieve genuine, albeit limited reforms. That depends, however, on the radical’s ability to build and sustain collaborative relationships with the various constituencies for progressive change. Barbaro’s successes in the New York legislature were due in large measure to his skillful deployment of the organizing and leadership abilities he had honed as a workplace and community activist.

Frank Barbaro, an “ethnic” politician who never engaged in or pandered to ethnocentrism, also has shown that an elected official can serve – and maintain – his base while pursuing an expansive agenda. Contrast Barbaro’s progressive populism to the right-wing

authoritarianism of a Rudy Giuliani or the despicable immigrant bashing of a Tom Tancredo. But Barbaro's visceral identification with and commitment to working people, the poor, and the oppressed also shames his own party, the timid, centrist, and pro-big business Democrats.

If Italian American radicalism now seems like a lost world, the radical life of Frank Barbaro reminds us that it is one worth rediscovering and reinventing for our own times.

NOTES

¹ In 1997, the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of the City University of New York presented a conference titled "The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism." Conference presentations focused on the involvement of Italian Americans in various left-wing and social change movements, including anarchism, communism, and the civil rights movement. Proceedings were published as *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism*. Philip Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer, editors. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003.

² The CPUSA established the Labor Youth League in 1949. The LYL it held its first Congress a year later, with African American radical icon Paul Robeson as its keynote speaker. The LYL dissolved in the dissension following

² The CPUSA established the Labor Youth League in 1949. The LYL it held its first Congress a year later, with African American radical icon Paul Robeson as its keynote speaker. The LYL dissolved in the dissension following the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and the 20th Congress of the Communist party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).

³ The tenant committee eventually succeeded in stopping evictions, and in 1950, forced Met Life to drop its racist policy and give leases to black families. In 1951, the New York City Council passed a law barring racial discrimination in publicly supported housing. However, integration moved at a snail's pace for decades. See: "Met Life to Stuy Tenants: Middle Class My Ass!" Bennett Baumer, *The Independent*, September 21, 2006

⁴ Arthur Miller. *Timebends: A Life*. New York: Grove Press, 1987, 147

⁵ "The Legacy of Pete Panto and the Brooklyn Rank-and-File Committee." William Mello. *The Italian American Review*. Vol. 9, Number 1, Spring/Summer 2002, 1-14

⁶ John Dickie. *Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2004; 178-179

⁷ See Mello, "The Legacy of Pete Panto and the Brooklyn Rank-and-File Committee."

⁸ As William Mello has observed, Dockers News, which began in the late 1940s and continued to exist well into the 1980s, was more than just a newsletter; the Dockers News group was a waterfront activist collective itself. Its members also had a history of anti-racist organizing and several who ran on an anti-racist Unity Slate were elected to leadership positions in ILA locals. William J Mello, *Science & Society*; Jan 2007; 126

⁹ During this era, one of its most dynamic periods, the CPUSA guided many non-Party organizations and coalitions that boasted more members and more impact than the Party itself.

¹⁰ The Central Labor Council vote in support of Barbaro was nearly unanimous, with only the United Federation of Teachers representative absent and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union representative abstaining. "Labor council expected to endorse Barbaro." Frank Lynn. *The New York Times*, July 30, 1981.

¹¹ “Bensonhurst Marchers Meet Quiet, In Empty Streets.” James C. McKinley, Jr. *The New York Times*, May 27, 1990

¹² “Protests Worth Risk, Supporters Say.” Dennis Hevesi. *The New York Times*, September 2, 1989

¹³ “Bensonhurst Marchers Meet Quiet, In Empty Streets.” James C. McKinley, Jr. *The New York Times*, May 27, 1990

¹⁴ “La Dolce Bensonhurst,” George De Stefano. *Outweek*, October 8, 1989, 34-37

¹⁵ “Italians Against Racism: The Murder of Yusuf Hawkins (R.I.P.) and My March on Bensonhurst.” Joseph Sciorra. *Are Italians White?* Edited by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno. New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 204

¹⁶ Owners of livery cabs had sought to have their employees declared independent contractors, which Barbaro opposed because that meant they would not have received workers’ compensation, unemployment and disability benefits. When the owners’ case failed with the Workers Compensation Board and the New York Attorney General, they tried to achieve their goals legislatively. Barbaro refused to support legislation introduced by Assembly Member Gregory Weeks, an African American, which would have classified livery drivers, many of whom were black and Latino, as independent contractors. Weprin subsequently removed Barbaro as chair of the Assembly Labor Committee.