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CWA Phone Banks, Labor Walks Vital to Victory in Buffalo-Area District



At Local 1122's 50th anniversary celebration May 19, CWA President Larry Cohen, left, praised Buffalo-area members for working hard to elect a pro-worker candidate to Congress. Democrat Kathy Hochul won the seat in a special election Tuesday. Pictured with Cohen are Local 1122 Area Vice President (North) Lisa Dobson and her father, Earl Frampton, former president of CWA Local 1115.

Below: Cohen and District 1 Vice President Chris Shelton with Local 1168 members at the May 19 event, which drew about 300 CWA activists.



The Republican agenda to kill Medicare, trample workers' rights and cut millionaires' taxes at the expense of everyone else took a well-earned beating in upstate New York on Tuesday, as a Democrat comfortably won the special election for a U.S. House seat the GOP has held for generations.

CWA members in Buffalo and surrounding Erie County made phone calls and knocked on doors for winner Kathy Hochul, helping voters understand what was at stake. Local 1122 President Jim Wagner said that by Tuesday night, "We were feeling pretty confident."

"Our local, all of CWA in western New York and the rest of the labor community stepped up big time," Wagner said. "We had volunteers in here many nights working the phone bank, we did a labor walk last Saturday, and last week, on the 50th anniversary of our local, we had President Cohen here firing everyone up about the race and how important it was."

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Speaking to 300 CWA activists in Buffalo at the May 19 celebration, President Larry Cohen and District 1 Vice President Chris Shelton thanked the volunteers, telling them their hard work was already paying off: Polls showed the election closer than anyone had expected early on, and the national media were paying attention.

"The message is clear," Shelton said. "America's middle-class voters reject Republican and extremist plans to dismantle the programs and policies that working families and retirees count on. The question for candidates is simple: Whose side are you on?"

The special election was held to replace Republican Rep. Chris Lee, a married congressman who resigned earlier this year in a scandal over his shirtless photo and personal inquiries on an Internet dating site.

Republican Jane Corwin was widely expected to win the seat until she joined other members of her party in embracing a scheme to privatize Medicare. As proposed by Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), seniors would get a government voucher and attempt to buy health insurance on the open market, instead of Medicare.

The issue turned politics upside down in what has been one of the country's most steadfast GOP congressional districts. It has nearly 30,000 more registered Republicans than Democrats, was one of only four New York districts to vote for John McCain in 2008, and one of six that voted for George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004. When Lee won his seat in 2010, he received 74 percent of the vote.

But after U.S. House Republicans voted in favor of Ryan's Medicare-killing budget, polls shifted. In Erie County, one poll showed that Medicare was the single most important issue for 21 percent of voters. Among that group, 80 percent said they were voting for Hochul.

"We had the issues on our side," Hochul said after her victory. "We can balance the budget the right way and not on the backs of our seniors."