

## As Blakeman seeks statewide visibility, brief LIRR strike a window of opportunity

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ALBANY - A labor strike can generate political peril or opportunity.

It was more the latter for Republican Bruce Blakeman as the Long Island Rail Road strike stretched into its third day, experts said of a gubernatorial candidate who needs to break through with a statewide electorate that doesn't really know him.

"He can score some points and get better known," said Lawrence Levy, dean of suburban studies at Hofstra University.

But his window was short. Shortly before 9 p.m. Monday, Gov. Kathy Hochul, Blakeman's Democratic opponent, announced an end to the strike with service to resume noon Tuesday.

Blakeman, the Nassau County executive, trails Hochul by 16 percentage points in the latest Siena College poll. Just as important, 64% of New Yorkers said they didn't know Blakeman or know enough about him to have an opinion.

The LIRR strike presented a leadership challenge for Hochul because she controls the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which was at odds with the five striking unions. But the stoppage also provided a brief opening for Blakeman.

"He is facing the problem all challengers have, which is the lack of agency to affect the outcome of this (the strike) on a large scale," Christopher Malone, associate provost of Farmingdale State University, told Newsday early Monday, before the strike ended.

"So, he's relegated to saying what he would do differently and hoping Hochul screws up," Malone continued. "The only way I see him gaining traction is if the strike drags on for a while and Hochul starts to get blamed for it by the public. Right now, that is not happening."

Blakeman had blasted Hochul's "failure" for what he calls allowing the contract negotiations to get to this point. He called on the governor to suspend "congestion pricing," the extra toll for driving into the busiest section of Manhattan, during the strike. He said commuters are "miserable," borrowing a term from his campaign stump speech.

But he also was careful not to side one way or another on the strike, the contract or how it all should be settled.

"I'm not going to the bargaining table at this point, as an outsider, and tell the unions what they should settle for," Blakeman said Sunday at the Long Beach train station during a news conference that doubled as a campaign rally.

He said he was the champion of working people.

"I look at our workers as the men and women who live in our communities, and they create the prosperity and

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jobs in our communities," the Republican said. "We stand by our workers."

To win a statewide race in New York, a Republican has to win upstate by at least double digits or maybe close to 20 points, experts have said. But he trails Hochul by 5 upstate and his name recognition is low - 68% say they don't know him or had no opinion.

But experts said a strike on Long Island might have limited force with voters in swing areas such as Syracuse or Rochester.

Hank Sheinkopf, a veteran Democratic strategist, said Blakeman's task right now is "Can he find issues that resonate?" It's not clear yet if the LIRR strike will be such.

"His argument would be: She is in charge of the MTA. She can't be trusted. She can't manage," Sheinkopf said.

Ahead of the announced end of the strike, Malone predicted: "If the strike ends quickly and labor gets a partial victory, Hochul will claim victory with an important base -- and Blakeman will have to look elsewhere to change the narrative of the race."

Newsday's Bahar Ostadan and Michael O'Keeffe contributed to this story.

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