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Thousands Rally Outside City Hall Unions Deliver Budget Message to Mayor

By DAVID SIMS



The Chief-Leader/Adrienne Haywood-James

MAKING THEIR PRESENCE FELT: Union members massed at City Hall to pressure Mayor Bloomberg to reconsider job and service cuts while sending a message to state leaders that serious budget problems were better addressed by raising taxes on the wealthy.

'Save Those Services'

"Labor and community are coming together to tell our elected officials: save our services, protect our communities, protect the most vulnerable, whether they be kids in schools that need a chance to succeed, whether they be people who are laid off and facing foreclosure, people who need healthcare. We're saying save those services in these tough times," she said.

Mayor Bloomberg's proposed budget would cut 8,500 city jobs even after a threatened layoff of 15,000 school employees was staved off by funding from the Federal stimulus package. Ms. Weingarten said one of the key tasks of the rally was to urge state and city lawmakers to direct the funds wisely. "It can be a lifeline for Teachers and other educators if it is spent wisely to protect the classroom," she said. "As President Obama has said over and over, we cannot simply cut our way out of this economic crisis."

DC 37 Executive Director Lillian Roberts, whose members are among the most affected by the coming job reductions, said that "the dictatorship in the city has resulted in war being declared on the middle class, the poor and the unions." She urged the crowd to "[say] loud and clear, stop these union-busting tactics of pitting workers against the community.

"Use the state's rainy-day fund, and use the \$9 billion we showed in our white paper that the Mayor has set aside for outside contracting," she suggested. "There's a better way; the sacrifice must be shared. Restructure our tax system so that the wealthy pay their fair share."

'Stiffing the Poor'

In one of the largest city labor gatherings in decades, more than 10,000 members of a broad coalition of unions and community organizations gathered on Broadway March 5, stretching from City Hall as far north as Canal St., to demand alternatives to the city's current budget plans. They called for tax reform, the reduction of outside contracting, and direction of the Federal stimulus package to health-care, education and social services.

"We know times are tough, but when times are tough, you think bold, you act bold and you protect the most vulnerable," said United Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, whose members joined with those of District Council 37 and Service Employees International Union Local 1199, along with non-profit organizations in the One New York Coalition.



The Chief-Leader/Adrienne Haywood-James

'WE DIDN'T CAUSE THIS PROBLEM': Municipal Labor Committee Chairman Harry Nespoli tells the crowd that it's unfair to ask city workers to pay the price for the excesses of Wall Street. Looking on are, from left, Doctors Council President Barry Liebowitz, Correction Officers Benevolent Association President Norman Seabrook, and AFL-CIO New York City Central Labor Council leader Jack Ahern.

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DC 37 Local 371 President Faye Moore, who represents many of the 200 Housing Authority community center workers who were already laid off, said that the budget "destroys decades of social programs proven to help the city's poor." She charged that "Bloomberg is thumbing his nose at our services for the needy."

"It's not right that we have to be here to talk about the rights of people to education, health-care and social services," said SEIU Local 1199 President George Gresham. "There's going to be some pain, but we resent that while we're fighting for the crumbs, the rich and wealthy are being left alone."

Also pushing for the raising of taxes on wealthier New Yorkers, which is currently being debated in the State Legislature, was City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, who took the stage with dozens of other Council Members. "We need to make sure that in addition to spending the stimulus money correctly, that we begin to tax fairly. People who make more money should pay higher taxes, and people who make less money should pay lower taxes," she said. "Albany, do the right thing—send New York the money we're owed, the money we need to keep our city running."

Calls Budget Unfair to Workers

Municipal Labor Committee Chairman Harry Nespoli said that the Mayor's budget weighed unfairly on city workers, considering the causes of much of the city's fiscal woes. "We did not cause this problem. The corporations caused it, with their [bonus] checks and their investments. Yet now, they want to close hospitals, they wanna lay off state workers, they wanna lay off city workers. We have to say together we did not cause this problem," he said.

Professional Staff Congress President Barbara Bowen railed against the tuition fee hikes at City University of New York. "Do you want to cut off the future of thousands of people?" she asked. "Don't let anyone tell you that budget cuts are inevitable. Albany, find courage to stand up for education."

Members at the rally, who huddled in the cold for hours along Broadway, said that they had been motivated by the sense of community among the coalition of labor unions.

"It went really well, everyone came out to support everybody," said Audley Robinson, a paraprofessional at C.S. 66 in The Bronx. "I came here with all of my Teachers, parents, school aides, everybody at C.S. 66. We came to support all the unions here."

'A State of Emergency'

"I came here not for myself at all, but for the City of New York which is our children, our mothers and our fathers," said Karen Palmer, a DC 37 Local 1549 shop steward who works at Metropolitan Hospital. She said that the situation within her agency was already critical. "We are losing jobs as I speak, the rich people have not paid their fair share of taxes, and it's been going on for years. We are in a state of emergency here."

"We need more jobs, I can't get any jobs. Some days you work, some days you don't. We need money, so we need things to be better for everyone," said Yvonne Vassell, a school worker who is a member of Local 1199.

Margaret Diggins, a home health care aide in Local 1199, said that she felt her work was "important and meaningful" and should not be cut back. "Our patients depend on us to stay in their homes," she said.

One member at the rally remembered first-hand labor's efforts in past economic crunch times, but said that this gathering had been even stronger. "I think it's wonderful, I think it's one of the first times we've ever gotten everybody together. Not just the unions, but the community—I think it's fantastic," said Edith Shanker, a UFT retiree and the widow of the legendary UFT leader Albert Shanker.

"In 1975 he led the Teachers across the bridge, but something like this, with the whole community together, this is incredible; it's wonderful," she said. "We have to put pressure on the people that have to work it out. If they think they can help just in terms of the bankers, they better think again, because they have to save people in homes, in schools, they have to think differently."

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