

Decry Mayor's Benefit Attacks

For Many City Retirees, Little Gravy in Pensions

BOOM AND BUST



District Council 37 Photo

BOOM AND BUST: Retired Child Support Investigator Neal Frumkin said that it was ridiculous for city and state leaders to blame deficits on high pension costs considering the rewards they had reaped in boom times. 'For many years, the city didn't have to pay anything into the pension plan when the stock market was throwing off big gains in the investments,' he said. 'In the good times, they said nothing. In the bad times, they said it was our fault. We shouldn't be taking the blame for a system that functions that way.'

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By DAVID SIMS |

Amid Mayor Bloomberg's proposals to rein in what he calls runaway pension costs, some retirees who are just scraping by say the Mayor's depiction of lavish benefits doesn't square with their reality.

The average New York City Employees' Retirement System member gets a pension of about \$33,000 a year; the average District Council 37 retiree gets \$17,200 a year, with many living on far less than that.

'Cherry-Picking' Exceptions

Neal Frumkin, a retired Child Support Investigator who worked for the city for more than 34 years, said he thinks the inflated pension figures that are often featured in the media are a result of "cherry-picking."

"The press seizes on somebody who had a high-paid managerial position, and they generalize the pension that person is receiving," he said

in a phone interview. He said he knows retirees who make no more than \$1,400 a month from their pensions and Social Security combined.

“People are very much afraid, because they are beyond the age where you could look for work once again,” he said. “Most of them have worked many years for the city and basically they, like I, felt that you had given up salary, the possibility of earning more money, for the knowledge that you’d receive a pension when you retire. That’s sort of a trade-off in civil service.”

His pension, Mr. Frumkin said, was higher—\$32,000 a year, or roughly \$2,650 a month—which reflects the qualifications needed for his job as well as his length of service. But he said he felt the same outrage when city retirees were portrayed as living the high life in news stories about Mayor Bloomberg’s proposed pension cuts, which would include raising the retirement age to 65 for civilian workers, eliminating the use of overtime to boost allowances, and requiring 10 years’ service before pension rights vest.

‘Slapped in the Face’

“We who served careers in New York are basically being slapped in the face with this attack on the pensions that we’ve received,” he said. “Our pay was modest, our pensions were modest, and we are basically the last bastion of workers who have these kinds of pensions.”

Shirley Foster, a 70-year-old retired clerical worker from the former Board of Education, got an even tougher deal because she left after 9½ years on the job because of an injury she sustained from a fall at her office.

“Because I didn’t put in the whole 10 years, I think that’s why they gut me so much—I only get a check for \$186.44 every month,” she said. “It’s literally nothing; it’s hard for me to even try to pay a bill with it, or use it for my main meals for the month. I also got Meals on Wheels, which gave me a lunch once a day, so that helps me out pretty good. But if I didn’t have that, I don’t know what I would do.”

Ms. Foster sustained her injury in 1999 and had to fight with the Giuliani administration to get even her modest pension, which only began “a year or two” after she retired. She sustained an injury to her spine and has been mostly homebound ever since, walking with a walker or cane and in “continuous pain.”

‘Fighting to Keep My House’

“With the help of my children, I’ve been able to keep the house going. But then I got sick, and there were hospital bills, medicine bills, and with the water bills and bills on the house, something has to give,” she said. “Now I’m fighting to keep my house, a 70-year-old woman fighting to keep her house.”

She said she felt she had been betrayed by the city’s promise of a stable paycheck and pension. “You know what I can’t understand? After being with the city for as long as I did, and I was a faithful worker, and getting hurt on the job, getting no money at all,” she said.

Kathleen Rezek, who worked in the medical records department of Jacobi Hospital in The Bronx for 26 years, also relies on her city pension and Social Security to help her pay her bills at her local clinic, which she frequently visits because of health issues.

Now, more budget cuts might threaten her chances of getting help there, she said. “The clinic I go to, they’re cutting that too... They put me on a sliding scale because I couldn’t pay the money that the clinic wanted me to pay. I’m worried they’ll cut that, and I won’t be able to go to the clinic anymore and get help.”

She said she relied on the clinic for “Nutrition, dental, psychotherapy and physical therapy.” She has a monthly income of about \$2,200, which is her pension and Social Security combined.

‘Paid for What We Got’

Stu Leibowitz, the president of the DC 37 Retirees Association, said his members were being unfairly attacked considering that they had sacrificed larger wage increases for decent benefits at the bargaining table.

“We followed the puritan ethic of saving for our old age, and we’re being penalized for having done that,” he said in a phone interview. “From the union perspective, nobody gave us anything; we paid for what we got, we paid for the pensions.”

Referring to the political battle in Wisconsin over legislation that would strip public employees of collective-bargaining rights, he said,

“They’re using public-employee benefits as an excuse for the attack on the unions, on public-sector unions.”

He added, “An employer legitimately can say I can’t afford the benefits you have, you guys have to start paying more towards your pension, more towards your health-care. But when he says I want to disassemble your right to collectively bargain, that’s a different story. The attack on benefits is camouflage for an attack on unions.”

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