

Cuomo's Advice That City Unions 'Get Real' on Contracts Greeted Skeptically

By DAVID SIMS | Posted: Monday, December 2, 2013 5:00 pm

Governor Cuomo Nov. 26 said that the city's unions needed "a reality adjustment" entering contract negotiations with incoming Mayor Bill de Blasio, harking back to New York's fiscal situation in the 1970s, but Municipal Labor Committee Chairman Harry Nespoli said the comparison didn't fit.

Speaking at a press conference at the Javits Center, Mr. Cuomo praised unions for their "superb" help during the city's 1970s fiscal crisis and in dealing with other shortfalls, adding they would have to be "realistic" in coming contract talks.

'Unions Understood in Past'

"Going into the conversation, everyone needs a reality adjustment," Mr. Cuomo said. "The unions have understood that in the past and they've acted accordingly, and my guess is that they will again."

Mr. Nespoli said the Governor was wrong to compare this round of bargaining, where every union contract has been expired for years, to the fiscal crises of the past.

"I know the Governor is the Governor, but the fact is, he's comparing 1975 to what the economy is right now," he said in a phone interview. "You can't compare it: we were going bankrupt in 1975, and [today] we have a balanced budget."

He noted that Mayor Bloomberg had pleaded poverty at the bargaining table and warned of cuts in every budget presentation, but consistently produced surpluses at the end of every fiscal year. The city's coffers are hardly as bare as the Governor made it sound, Mr. Nespoli said.

'Expecting Fair Contract'

"Unions are responsible, as the Governor said," he continued. "We realize what's going on in the country. But to work in New York is very expensive, and we're five years without a contract. We're expecting a fair contract."

Regarding Mr. Cuomo's reference to past examples of unions pitching in to help the city's fiscal situation, Mr. Nespoli noted that the MLC negotiated health-care savings multiple times in the Bloomberg years.

"When it's down and out, there's a big problem in this city, we always come forward," he said. "We did it two years ago with this administration, when we increased co-pays for our members

and called the vendor in to have them adjust their rates for the city.

“If we see at the bargaining table that there is a problem in the city, we will definitely work to help out. But we also have a fiduciary responsibility to our members,” he continued. “We’re responsible, and he’s hoping that smarter minds at the bargaining table will prevail, and I really honestly think they will.”

A Harsher Assessment

Communications Workers of America Local 1180 President Arthur Cheliotis was incensed by the Governor’s comments, slamming his Committee to Save New York, a lobbying group that supported his efforts in Albany until it recently disbanded. “The reality check needs to happen with those people,” he said in a phone interview.

“We can’t continue this inequality and this polarization. It will lead to bad things for our state and our city,” Mr. Cheliotis continued. “We can’t continue to polarize and destroy the middle class and polarize our citizens. City workers are the backbone of the middle class.”