

Union workers face cuts for pay, health benefits and pension, but aren't putting up a fight

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There's a war going on about trimming the paychecks, health benefits and pensions of public employees.

But the public employee unions are barely showing up for the fight.

[Mayor Bloomberg](#), the [Citizens Budget Commission](#) and the [Manhattan Institute](#) are among the many groups banging the drum to rein in what the city pays its workers.

Granted, Bloomberg agreed to 4% pay hikes when he was running for a third term and needed union endorsements. But with pension and health care costs exploding, municipal workers are a target.

The drumbeat seems to be working: A [Quinnipiac University](#) poll last month found 56% of New Yorkers said union workers aren't doing their fair share. Even 49% of Democrats felt that way.

So where's the response from the once-feared DC37, from the supposedly powerful [Working Families Party](#), from the Municipal Labor Committee that won those allegedly crippling benefits?

Unions have newsletters and rallies to reach their members, but nobody seems to be coordinating a modern campaign with a united message to win over the public.

"We are losing, and we need to make the case," admitted [Dan Cantor](#), head of the Working Families Party, which is backed by unions but has been crippled by probes into its failure to keep its books in order.

"There is this great smokescreen of public employees who are causing the problems because of their huge pensions," agreed [Greg Floyd](#), head of Teamsters Local 237. "We have to do this."

There's fertile ground for counterattack.

The city's Independent Budget Office says the big reason pension costs will rise in future years is that pension funds took a big hit in the recession and need more cash to make up what they lost.

In other words, union heads say, the [Wall Street](#) bankers who caused the crisis got bailed out by the feds - but teachers, detectives and token booth clerks are being told to cut back.

"Anybody else who thinks that our pension is too rich should come down and spend a night working as a bus operator, driving a bus down Utica Ave., getting spit on, punched," said [John Samuelson](#), head of the [Transport Workers Union Local 100](#). "They should come down, get on a rail job, walking through mud."

Those huge pensions, by the way? The average retiree from the main city pension fund - which includes [MTA](#) workers - received \$33,194 in 2008, the last year for which figures are available.

Of course, plenty of private-sector workers would be happy to have any pension these days, much less the health coverage and political clout that comes with membership in a municipal union.

Union leaders have a simple response: Every New Yorker who works for a living deserves the same, and ought to focus their anger on their own bosses instead.

"We need to make private sector employment more like public sector employment. That's how to expand the middle class," said [Dan Morris](#) from the labor-friendly [Drum Major Institute](#). "Our side of this debate should be a much bigger part of the story."