

New York's Union Snow Job

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New York's fierce winter storm that left snow-clogged streets unplowed for days, preventing emergency medical crews from saving lives and rescuing stranded residents, appears to be the result of a union slowdown to protest city budget cuts.

The paralyzing late-December blizzard that dumped two feet of snow on Manhattan has long since abated and the streets are clear, but the bitter political repercussions from the city's mishandling of the storm continue.

An angry Mayor Michael Bloomberg called the sabotaged cleanup operation "unacceptable" and ordered an investigation into why the trouble-plagued communications and dispatching system failed to deal with a backlog of 911 calls. The chief of the Emergency Medical Service was replaced amid warnings of further reprisals to come.

And a federal and city investigation was underway to determine whether Sanitation Department workers deliberately slowed down snow removal operations, leaving countless streets unplowed to protest demotions, worker layoffs and budget cutbacks.

Bloomberg aides said further demotions and firings were likely and City Council members called for hearings to probe the city's botched response to the storm.

At least three deaths were the result of impassable city streets, including a three-month boy and a newborn baby who died because snow bound emergency medical vehicles could not reach them in time.

But the bombshell revelation came at the end of December when an investigative team at the New York *Post* reported that Sanitation Department bosses had "ordered their drivers to snarl the blizzard cleanup to protest budget cuts -- a disastrous move that turned streets into a minefield for emergency-services vehicles."

"Miles of roads stretching from as north as Whitestone, Queens, to the south shore of Staten Island still remained treacherously unplowed last night because of the shameless job action," the *Post* reported.

One of their key sources was City Councilman Dan Halloran, R-Queens, who told the *Post* he was visited "by a group of guilt-ridden sanitation workers who confessed the shameless plot."

"Halloran said he met with three plow workers from the Sanitation Department -- and two Department of Transportation supervisors who were on loan -- at his office after he

was flooded with irate calls from constituents.

“The snitches ‘didn’t want to be identified because they were afraid of retaliation,’ Halloran said. ‘They were told [by supervisors] to take off routes [and] not do the plowing of some of the major arteries in a timely manner. They were told to make the mayor pay for the layoffs, the reductions in rank for the supervisors, shrinking the rolls of the rank-and-file,’” the *Post* reported.

These workers said they were told to slow down their plows to increase their overtime pay, set their plows higher than the roads’ pavement, and bypass numerous neighborhoods.

There were also reports of snow plow operators calling in sick, with workers saying the work slowdown was in retaliation for payroll cutbacks by the mayor.

The Bloomberg administration has cut hundreds of trash haulers over the past two years to trim payrolls in the current budget crisis, reducing their number from nearly 7,000 to 6,300. Just last week, 100 department supervisors were demoted and their salaries cut as part of the latest cost-savings reforms.

In the aftermath of the storm, as angry complaints pored in from across the city, Bloomberg became increasingly unhappy with the government’s response to the blizzard -- saying last week that he was “extremely dissatisfied with the way our emergency response systems performed.”

As well he should be considering how much municipal workers are paid in salary, healthcare, pensions and other benefits.

“If money could melt snow, Mayor Bloomberg would be basking in victory over the storm,” Manhattan Institute’s Nicole Gelinas writes in the *City Journal*. “When he took office in 2002, Gotham spent \$1.3 billion annually on the Department of Sanitation. Today, the city spends more than \$2.2 billion.”

Where is all this money going? “Not into better services but into workers’ health care and pensions,” Gelinas said.

“Taxpayers now spend \$144,000 on salary and benefits for each sanitation worker, up from \$79,000 nearly a decade ago. Nine years ago, taxpayers contributed about \$10.5 million annually to support sanitation pensions; this year, they’ll cost \$240 million,” she said.

This is the much larger scandal behind last month’s outrageous slow down action by outrageously well-paid people who are in effect holding with city’s residents hostage to their demands for higher pay and benefits. They are supposed to be our public servants but in fact New York’s beleaguered taxpayers have become their servants.

What can Bloomberg do about it? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Hire outside contractors to handle all trash and snow removal. That would reduce payrolls and eliminate the costs of pensions and health care benefits, leaving the city free to hire the most efficient and least costly workers available, saving taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars.

“What happened in New York last month is a perfect example of why monopolies are bad and don’t work in the private or public sector, especially unionized ones. This is a service that can and should be privatized, giving New Yorkers a choice,” said Christopher Edwards, a state and municipal budget analyst at the Cato Institute.

2. Make all new municipal workers contribute to their own 401(k) retirement funds and health care plans just as tens of millions of other working taxpayers do now.

3. Collective bargaining by unions should be banned in the public sector as they are in Virginia and other states.

4. Establish clear benchmarks for public performance that will be expected of municipal employees, including a ban on strikes, work slowdowns or any other actions that endanger public health and safety. The penalty for violating any of these rules: Immediate firing.

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