

## Union leaders say they are not the cause of New York's fiscal crisis

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Leaders from the state and region's largest unions say they are wrongly being vilified for New York's high property taxes and the nation's prolonged economic slump. Teachers, civil servants and other government workers are vital to the state's middle class and must play a role in reinventing government with Gov. Andrew Cuomo and other leaders, they say.

"There is certainly a national trend to demonize unions," said Vivian Street, a regional coordinator for Public Employees Federation AFL-CIO, which represents thousands of state workers. "To put the responsibility of the entire economic downfall on unions, to me that is laughable. "If it had not been for unions, what kind of work force would we have? There's a reason for unions."

During a roughly one-hour meeting with the Editorial Board of The Journal News, leaders from Civil Service Employees Association, Public Employees Federation, NYSUT and Harrison Association of Teachers defended their work and their role as protector of the middle class. They also said they are willing to help this governor and other leaders redefine government during these uncertain times.

"We want to be part of the solution," said Carl Korn, a spokesman for NYSUT, which represents 600,000 teachers and health care professionals. "But any solution has to be fair to the middle class," he said. They talked about the perils of a tax cap on education and services, weighed the merits of a so-called millionaire's tax on the wealthy, and defended their wages and pensions as well as other efforts to be generally reasons for the mood.

Though some say Republican lawmakers and business groups have led the battle against unions, Democrats aren't shying away, either. Cuomo, a Democrat, called for a one-year salary freeze for all state workers —after he refused to restore 900 layoffs. In Westchester, Republican County Executive Rob Astorino is negotiating contracts with six unions and seeking concessions like contributions to health care costs. He also unsuccessfully asked CSEA to forego 4 percent raises.

Robert Baker, a medical doctor with a practice in New Rochelle who is frustrated with New York's high taxes, said while union members deserve "fair benefits," their pensions are "way out of line." "It's nice to get huge pensions, but they are bankrupting the rest of the country and injuring the middle class the most by the taxes required to pay for them," he said. He supports a 401K-type plan that matches up to 6 percent a year for all new employees. A 401K plan, according to Korn of NYSUT, would mostly benefit Wall Street.

CSEA members make an average of \$40,000 per year and receive a \$14,000-a-year pension, said Stephen Madarasz, the union's director of communications.