

Unions Protest City's Mandate to Stranded Staff to Get to Work

By DAVID SIMS | Posted: Tuesday, November 6, 2012 4:15 pm

As the city began to settle back into a normal routine one week after Hurricane Sandy made landfall, union leaders said they would press the issue of members classified as “nonessential” workers being told to report to their jobs in the midst of the storm, even though transit service was suspended and storm conditions in the city remained dangerous.

In his Oct. 29 update on the storm, which told citizens to “remain in your homes while this storm is in progress” and announced that schools would be closed, Mayor Bloomberg also said that “city government is open for business today” and urged employees to find a way to work.

‘You Know Your Assignments’

“When others need help, we’ve got to be there,” he said. “To all city workers with operational duties related to Hurricane Sandy: You know what your assignments are and you should be executing them and thank you for your dedication.”

For workers without operational duties, Commissioners were told to use their judgment and let staffers leave early if necessary. “But let me be clear: city government is open and these are the times when New Yorkers need us the most,” the Mayor said. “We do want to have everyone [be] safe and not inconvenience anybody more than necessary. But we understand why we’re here.”

Many civilian union leaders said that the Mayor’s edict had been reckless, and that they would fight any attempt to make workers take sick days or annual leave for days they did not report to work during the storm.

“We have people who did extraordinary things, helped in shelters,” said District Council 37 Local 371 President Anthony Wells. “We have others who are stuck, with no access to transportation or power, and were concerned about the policy of being compensated and not being charged.”

‘They Shouldn’t Be Penalized’

“We hope those who could not make it will not be penalized,” he continued. “There was no subway. We’ve never had anything like this; it’s extraordinary...the main thing is that people need to get paid appropriately, [that] people don’t lose their paycheck at a time everyone needs resources. If not, we will do what we have to do to protect our workers.”

DC 37 Health Services Employees Local 768 President Fitz Reid said in a phone interview that the Mayor had “ordered them to come in without any regard for the situation.”

“The Mayor was not as careful or astute as he could have been in the first day. It led to some of the public being confused,” he said. “Because if he’s saying they should come out of Zone A, and then he’s telling workers they have to go out there, it’s not fair to them.”

Members Told ‘Don’t Say No’

Motor Vehicle Operators Local 983 President Mark Rosenthal said he had urged his members to help out however they could. “I told all my members to do what they gotta do, to volunteer, and not to say no,” he said in a phone interview. “The Tow Truck Operators didn’t like the idea that they had to move trees, ’cause it’s not their job, but I told them, ‘it’s an emergency. We’ll deal with it later.’”

Local 420 President Carmen Charles represents workers in hospitals, many of which had to be evacuated during the storm because they lost power. “If the subways and buses weren’t running, people couldn’t get to work. I instructed members, if you can walk to a hospital, then show up,” she said.

“I think overall people did very well. The only problem I have now is the Health and Hospitals Corporation trying to be a Scrooge and telling people who couldn’t get to work on Monday they’re not going to get paid,” she added. “We’ll deal with that. I mean, it’s just ridiculous. From a union standpoint, we have our ways of dealing with it.”