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Mayor Bloomberg Takes On Unions, Albany

Mayor Mike Bloomberg took a crack at rebuilding his flagging popularity today in a State of the City speech that made war on Albany. It was a new day. New, new, new.

Disagreeable memories of botched snow removal and mounds of uncollected trash produced by the recent blizzard were banished to Bloomberg's rear-view mirror in a 45-minute address at a theater on Staten Island.

Also receding into the horizon: the era of good feeling with the city's unions, during which small-minded critics claimed the mayor was buying at least tacit support for his third-term bid with generous contracts.

"I will not sign a contract with salary increases unless they are accompanied by reforms in benefit packages," the mayor vowed.

Bloomberg has never been a riveting public speaker and this was no exception. The closest thing he came to combining eloquence with emotion was an appeal for an old favorite: gun control. ("As long as we allow dangerous and deranged people to buy guns the promise of a more perfect union will remain empty for the thousands of Americans murdered with guns every year.")

But of course that's a federal issue that he has no control over whatsoever. The union contracts are a different matter. Nobody could argue that his vow to crack down wasn't overdue. The unionized workers aren't, as a rule, taking home huge paychecks. But the city is getting killed on the cost of benefits for retirees - the pension system that now costs us \$7 billion a year.

Unlike most private workers, the city employees get fixed pension benefits. They aren't huge in most cases, but they're swollen by the cost of early retirements. Many city workers, especially in the uniformed services, retire when they're in their 50s or even 40s. And until they reach the age when they qualify for Medicare, all their health care is on us.

"The public has come to realize that the party's over, and that means the good times are over not only for them, but for public employees too," said NYU's Mitch Moss.

It's hard enough for a city government - even one run by a term-limited billionaire and an extremely weak council - to take on this issue, which is freighted with both political problems and the emotional challenge of taking on police, teachers and firefighters.

But what makes it impossible is that the state legislature's involved, too.

"Let us manage ourselves," Bloomberg called out to Albany. This is obviously sensible. Getting the state legislature out of anything is invariably a good idea and nowhere more than in municipal pensions.

Every New York mayor has begged the state legislature to get its greasy hands out of one thing or another, almost always to no avail. But this does seem to be a promising moment.

Bloomberg's challenge to the unions, coupled with a pledge to hold the line on taxes and cut spending, closely tracked the neo-Republican rhetoric of the state's new governor, Democrat Andrew Cuomo. In tough economic times, it's an approach that has resonated with voters.

"Bloomberg has formed a kind of tag team with Cuomo," NYU's Moss said. "Andrew has been saying we have to change things, and Bloomberg is now saying what needs to be changed."

The mayor's speech was also sprinkled with small initiatives. Unhappiness with unpaved streets was strongest in the outer boroughs, and Bloomberg offered a consolation prize of sorts in the form a plan to allow some cabs to pick up street fares in outer boroughs.

"Whether you're standing on 42nd Street in Manhattan, 42nd Street in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, or 42nd Street in Sunnyside, Queens, you ought to be able to hail a cab," the mayor said to applause.

So say we all.