With the Republican National Convention about to come to town, leaders of the city's police and firefighter unions are taking advantage of the national attention focused on New York to make their case to the public. In TV ads, on billboards and at sidewalk rallies, the unions' message is the same: because the city does not pay its cops and firefighters an adequate wage, New York cannot attract or retain skilled uniformed workers.

These claims would be serious -- if they were true. New Yorkers understand and appreciate the risks facing our firefighters and police officers, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. But union leaders do the city and their members a disservice when they spread myths about the working conditions of the "bravest" and "finest."

The fact is, New York City pays its police and firefighters fairly. Including holiday and overtime pay, first-year police officers earn an average of $44,000. Detectives earn an average of $88,000 a year, while sergeants earn an average of $91,000.

Firefighters do even better. After five years, average total compensation for firefighters is $76,000. Further, more than two-thirds of firefighters fulfill the requirement of working two nine-hour days and two 15-hour nights a week by arranging to work two straight 24-hour shifts.

Union leaders say that Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg is treating their members like the "paper pushers" in District Council 37, the city's largest municipal union. But this union's members earn, on average, $30,000. The average uniformed worker earns more than twice that salary, with far more generous pension and benefits.

Perhaps that's why so many people are eager to join the ranks of the police and firefighters. While firefighters would be on the front lines in any terrorist attack, they also enjoy generous compensation and retirement benefits, flexible hours, and the sense of community that permeates life in the firehouse. More than 7,000 people took the most recent test to qualify as firefighters, although only about 500 can be hired in an average year.

The Police Department also has an abundance of qualified applicants. More than 12,000 new police officers have been
hired in the past five years, and the police academy easily filled its July 2004 class of nearly 1,700 recruits, even though the requirements have become more stringent. The new recruits are better educated than ever before: more than a quarter have bachelor's degrees. The current class of recruits is more diverse and has a larger percentage of city residents than does the department as a whole.

There are also signs that these officers are remaining on the force longer. True, most cops retire after 20 years; a police officer retiring today at age 42 after 20 years of service will collect $1.75 million in pension payments, based on actuarial projections. In 2003, however, only 81 percent of the department's officers retired in their 20th year, fewer than the 93 percent who retired in 1995.

New York City is safer today than it has been in recent history -- both homicides and fire fatalities are at their lowest levels in decades. Three years after 9/11, and despite the threat of terrorism, New York remains a place where most people want to live, work and study; its population is at a historic high.

New York's uniformed services deserve better pay. No one disputes that. It is also inarguable that police officers in many neighboring communities make more than their counterparts in New York City. But these comparisons don't prove as much as union leaders claim; Nassau County, for example, has a police force about one-tenth the size of the New York's, and its fiscal policies have brought it to the edge of bankruptcy.

There are limits to what city taxpayers can afford. Increasing the productivity of firefighters and police, as the mayor has proposed, would help to create the savings needed to pay for a modest increase in salaries. And labor harmony, especially on the eve of the convention, would help strengthen the bonds of trust and good will that police and firefighters have built with the public since 9/11.

**URL:** http://www.nytimes.com

**GRAPHIC:** Drawing (Drawing by John Howard)

**LOAD-DATE:** August 24, 2004