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They Can Call Him Mike

He meets union leaders, says he'll 'champion' workers

By Jessica Kowal
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"Dialoguing" with city leaders who did not support his candidacy, Mayor-elect Michael Bloomberg met yesterday with two municipal union bosses to sell the message that he'll "champion" city workers.

Bloomberg also toured a downtown office set aside for his transition by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani — then said he probably won't use it as his transition headquarters.

In other developments:

- Bloomberg said he has made some decisions about his transition team and transition schedule, but he declined to share information about them.
- His firm, Bloomberg LP, will reject a $14-million package of tax incentives offered by the city to create more jobs. Campaign spokesman William Cunningham said Bloomberg decided long ago to reject it and wanted to get questions about it "off the table."
- Bloomberg said he "should not be involved" in the selection of a new city council speaker. The next speaker is expected to become the leading Democratic voice of opposition in the still-Republican City Hall.
- He promised to fulfill his campaign pledge to take mass transit (including taxis) every day.
- He said he expects an informal atmosphere at City Hall, where anyone can call him "Mike."

The labor leaders, who endorsed various Democratic candidates for mayor, and Bloomberg took extra steps to appear friendly and positive.

United Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten planted a kiss on Bloomberg's cheek before he left, and Lee Saunders of District Council 37, the largest municipal union, presented Bloomberg with a bright green union T-shirt, which the mayor-elect promptly pulled over his pink dress shirt and tie for television cameras. All of this would be unthinkable with Giuliani.

"Unlike other people, I'm not gonna play the sour-grapes game," said Weingarten, whose members have worked for a year under an expired contract. "Bloomberg won, he did a great job, he deserves our support."

"I want them to make sure that they understand they will always have access to me," Bloomberg said. "They may not get the answer they want, but I'm a believer in dialoguing. I'm a believer in inclusiveness."

As he did throughout the campaign, Bloomberg spoke of a desire to reward the city's 250,000 workers — even if the city can't pay them much more.

"They can expect to have a mayor who fundamentally is their champion," Bloomberg said. He offered two ideas yesterday to inspire his troops: City residents should tell workers "Thanks for doing a good job" more often, and supervisors should go out for coffee, a beer or dinner with employees.

Bloomberg, a billionaire, said city finances make it impossible to outfit offices with fish tanks and free food (two perks available at his company offices and at his campaign headquarters) and he said he didn't think it would be legal for him to personally finance such things.

Saunders quipped, "But we would like to talk about the free food, OK?"

Bloomberg said he'll wait until he's mayor to discuss a new teachers contract, and he sent mixed signals about his plan to freeze teacher hiring, an idea that infuriated Weingarten when he floated it during the campaign. He said yesterday that no class would be without a teacher, but he did not say he'd maintain the current number of teachers.

At the large transition office near City Hall that Giuliani had rented for the new mayor, Bloomberg jingled newly made keys and looked over ungainly government-issue desks and chairs. Then he said he'll probably work in his sunnier Upper East Side campaign office to interview administration hires.

"It's a great space, beautiful space, nice furniture, it's big," he said of the office rented by Giuliani. "I think we'll use both spaces, but what goes where, I'm just not sure what."

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