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Mayor Says Unions Are Using Fire Response Times as Bargaining Chip

By [KAREEM FAHIM](#) and NICHOLAS CONFESSORE

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg lashed out yesterday at the leaders of two fire unions over an increase in fire response times, saying that if they were seeking a bargaining chip in contract negotiations with his administration, they could not "play with people's lives."

Mr. Bloomberg was referring to accusations made by the city fire commissioner this week that the unions were telling their members to drive more slowly to fires as a way to win concessions from the city.

The mayor, who is running for re-election, appeared to draw a distinction between firefighters and the leaders of the unions yesterday, saying, "This is a very few people with an agenda trying to slow down and hurt this city."

Mr. Bloomberg's pointed comments, made during his weekly radio program on WABC-AM, are the latest round in a dispute that erupted this week between the Fire Department and the two unions over city statistics showing an increase of 18 seconds in fire response times over the past eight months, compared with the same period last year.

Response times are seen as a critical indicator of the Fire Department's effectiveness. The Bloomberg administration has pointed to stable response times and reduced fire fatality rates as proof of its success in rebuilding a badly depleted Fire Department after the deaths of 343 firefighters on Sept. 11, 2001.

In reaction to the statistics, Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta sent a scathing letter on Thursday to the heads of the two unions, the Uniformed Firefighters Association and the Uniformed Fire Officers Association, accusing them of driving up response times for political gain; he cited union instructions that fire trucks should stop at red lights, blind intersections and entrances to one-way streets.

The unions deny doing anything except telling their officers and drivers to proceed more safely to emergencies after a fire truck collided with a suburban utility vehicle, killing the driver, in July 2004. Capt. Peter L. Gorman, president of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association, conceded that this advice

might have slowed the Fire Department's responses.

But yesterday, amid what the city officials contended were "personal" attacks on the fire commissioner, Captain Gorman repeated his claim that the closing of six engine companies in 2003 was the real reason for higher response statistics.

In a prepared statement, Captain Gorman called Mr. Scoppetta "weak and ineffective" as fire commissioner, and said an increase in annual emergency calls and the closing of engine companies had resulted in the "reckless endangerment of 8.1 million New York City residents."

He said Mr. Scoppetta's letter was an attempt to shift attention from the mayor's failed policies.

Mr. Bloomberg said yesterday that he had "no question" that the accusations against the unions were true, and cited the existence of a paper trail proving them.

"Over a quarter of all the engines have had better response times, so when they say that the closing of firehouses two years ago had something to do with response times, that's ridiculous," he said.

There was no sign yesterday of an end to the current bout of acrimony between the Fire Department and the two unions. Captain Gorman said the letter from Mr. Scoppetta on Thursday was a complete surprise to him, and that he had not heard the accusations in it before.

Nonetheless, he said he intended to speak with Mr. Scoppetta within a week. "Right now, I can't," he said. "We're both too hot."

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