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## Departing EMS Union Head Sees Progress Amid Siege

By FLORA FAIR

Patrick J. Bahnken, who's stepping down as the leader of Emergency Medical Service Local 2507 of District Council 37 at the end of this month, is optimistic about the future for his members, despite the dark clouds of 9/11 and a trend toward vilifying public workers.

"I think that the future looks really bright for the profession," he said, noting his local's work in advocating for a lead Federal agency for EMS workers. "And obviously, Medicaid reform is going to impact everyone in the world of health care, and that will be felt in EMS, as well."

### Wants Civil Service Extended

He also sees the relationship between EMS and FDNY improving, especially recently. "It has become very clear that [emergency medical services] are considered a unique but equally vital role within the Fire Department," he said. "There are obvious issues that are beyond the Commissioner's span of control—specifically, there is a need for civil-service testing up into the higher ranks of EMS like there is within fire and police."

Mr. Bahnken emphasized that the problem was never between EMTs, Paramedics and firefighters in the field, who work together on a daily basis, and that his relationship with Fire Commissioner Salvatore Cassano has been "exceptionally successful."

"Then again, he can't negotiate contracts with me, either...There are just things beyond his pay-grade," he said.

Increasingly, part of his job has been defending the merits of organized labor, as attacks from Republican leaders cast public workers in a harsh light. "You know, 'civil servant' has all of a sudden become a dirty word, and I think that those are the threats or the challenges that not only face my members, but face union people all across the country," he said.

### Made Members More Visible

Mr. Bahnken considers his greatest accomplishment over more than decade at the helm of Local 2507 gaining recognition for his rank and file. "We have a great team," he said of his fellow union officers. "Although this union is not huge compared to other unions, people know us, they respect what we do. We have a presence now in the world of labor that perhaps we had not enjoyed prior and that has come from the rank-and-file all the way up...We've made our place in the house of labor; we've earned it."

It's clear that Mr. Bahnken loves the combination of labor and medicine in his work, and the primary reason for this passion is his colleagues. "These are people that, on a daily basis, can face all the carnage that one human can bestow upon another," he said. "These people deal with death every day...We've seen some stuff, and we've lived through some stuff. My greatest hope is that they feel that I've served them well."

Among the "stuff" they've lived through, Mr. Bahnken puts 9/11 at the top of the list. "The one thing that Sept. 11 demonstrated to everybody, any New Yorker, any elected official, anybody else, is that the Emergency Medical

Technicians and Paramedics showed up,” he said. “That we were there, that this garbage of us being different from the cops and the firefighters—somehow all that is just hyperbole.”

### **Trade Center Work Took Toll**

After his time working on the pile, Mr. Bahnken was diagnosed with renal-cell carcinoma and lost half a kidney. Though he’s better now, he’s convinced the illness was a result of 9/11. “There are so many other people out there who are struggling,” he said. “They’re not looking to hit the lottery. These people are sick and dying for want of financial support to get the treatments that they need...What they want to do is to dance at their daughter’s wedding, they want to see their kids grow up, they want to be grandparents—that’s what they want.”

Though he was upset that the recent FDNY study linking cancer to exposure to toxins at the Trade Center site didn’t include EMTs and Paramedics, he knows that what is true for the firefighter community is also true for his own: “We continue to lay bodies down. We are a diminishing population.”

The Local 2507 executive board will designate an interim president to serve the remaining months of Mr. Bahnken’s fourth three-year term as president. “I feel, in some ways, sad because obviously it’s a great job, it’s great people,” he said. “I’m very proud to have the honor to represent them. But in some ways, it’s exciting. I’ve been doing this for quite a long time.”

Mr. Bahnken said the thing he’s definitely most looking forward to is spending more time with his seven-year-old daughter, whom he’s talked to more on the phone than in person over the years. “The sacrifices—they are what they are,” he said. “It comes with the job.”

As for his successor, he’s learned from years on the job that it takes a unique skill set to mobilize members. “I think the requisite skills for any labor leader are the same: the willingness to hear differing opinions, to be open-minded,” he said. “I think the union is about uniting people...and part of that is to trust the people you’re with. Each person has a unique talent and skill, and so the ability to be able to recognize that and to utilize it. No person is an island.”