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Health Deal Repeives 1,000 Jobs But Adds Hospital, ER Co-Pays

1,000 Provisionals Losing Posts, However; \$200 Welfare Fund Hike

By DAVID SIMS



ARTHUR CHELIOTES: Election may help preserve jobs.

Mayor Bloomberg and municipal union leaders have agreed to a deal under which layoffs of 1,000 permanent civil servants will be put off at least through Oct. 1 while the city receives significant budget relief through new employee co-pays for emergency room visits and hospital admissions along with administrative improvements in the city health benefits program.

The city, however, has begun to lay off roughly 1,000 provisional workers who lack civil service status. The deal also provides a one-time \$200 per-employee contribution to union welfare funds through a transfer of money from the Health Stabilization Fund created 25 years ago to cover benefit shortfalls.

Saves City \$1 Billion

Mr. Bloomberg, during a June 2 press conference at District Council 37's headquarters with many city union leaders, said the deal would save the city \$200 million in the coming fiscal year and a total of \$1 billion over a six-year period.

He thanked Municipal Labor Committee Chairman Harry Nespoli and his colleagues for having "confronted the city's budgetary challenge head on and come up with a plan that will continue to serve the long-term interests of our hard-working municipal employees while containing the cost of health-care benefits."

In addition to providing the welfare fund increase, at a cost of \$117 million, the Stabilization Fund is also the source of the roughly \$20 million that will allow 1,000 city workers who otherwise would have been laid off July 1 to remain on the payroll for at least the following three months. If there was cause for optimism that they would keep their jobs beyond then, it rested in the fact that, aside from the laid-off provisionals, another 1,700 jobs that had been placed in jeopardy by the Mayor's Executive Budget less than a month earlier seemed to have survived the storm.

Attrition, Economy Both Up

"The attrition rate goes up and down; that helps us," the Mayor said, implying that higher-than-expected departures from the city payroll reduced the need for layoffs. So had the improvement in tax revenues: at one point, he stated, "Our economy in the city seems to be doing a lot better," though he quickly cautioned that the city was "not out of the woods."



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Asked about the likelihood that something would happen to offer more than just a brief reprieve workers at issue, Mr. Bloomberg replied, "No matter how small the probability, at least it's a non-zero. There's some chance that maybe we'll find another revenue source, maybe we won't have a diminution in tax revenues that we've projected, maybe we can find some other way."



The Chief-Leader/Adrienne Haywood-James

'TOUGH MEETINGS' PRODUCE A DEAL: Mayor Bloomberg lays out the details of an agreement under which municipal unions will help the city cut its health costs by \$1 billion over six years through a combination of new co-pays and better administration of the health program. Among the labor leaders joining him was, to the Mayor's left, Municipal Labor Committee chair Harry Nespoli, who said union determination 'to stop the layoffs' resulted in the agreement at the end of a series of 'long, tough meetings.'

The Mayor offered no specific plan to permanently stop the layoffs of the 1,000 reprieved workers, but said that "no matter how small the probability" of saving them, "it's at least non-zero. There's some chance that maybe we'll find another revenue source, maybe we won't have a diminution in tax revenues that we've projected, maybe we can find some other way."

He said he still retained hopes of action on a Tier 5 pension bill covering new employees that was put forth by Governor Paterson, despite the MLC's opposition to the change. "We had two, three and four tiers in the past when the city got in trouble, and I think we should have a fifth tier. Obviously a lot of people standing behind me don't agree with that, but that's what negotiations are all about."

But Mr. Nespoli was quick to shoot down the possibility, saying, "We already told the Governor, and we already told the Mayor. We are not interested in sitting down to negotiate a Tier 5."

'United to Stop Layoffs'

The MLC chair praised his fellow union leaders for banding together on the issue of a layoff freeze, calling it "what unionism is all about," saying, "Everybody here, no matter if it's a small union, or the largest union, or a uniformed force, all totally agreed to stop the layoffs, and we did it."

Mr. Nespoli said that the stay of execution would "make people work for three months. It makes them pay their bills for three months . . . we have three months to join together, the city and labor, to turn it around, try and hold it off even more."

As part of the deal, a health benefits subcommittee and a labor management subcommittee will be established to help explore further cost-saving options and issues such as job-sharing, unpaid furloughs, compressed work schedules and employment opportunities for laid-off provisional employees.

Mr. Nespoli, who is also president of the Uniformed Sanitationmen's Association, said that the feeling among his members was that "to take a furlough now would be difficult to do," but he said the committee would be able to study the issue in more detail. "These three months that we're going to get, it could be something to look into, to stop any layoffs down the road," he said.

The agreement establishes a \$50 co-pay for emergency room and ambulatory care and a \$100 co-pay for inpatient admission under the HIP HMO; and institutes the GHICBP/ Blue Cross network over the entire hospital network.

"It has a relatively minimal impact on the members. Many of these things are relatively painless," said Communications Workers of America Local 1180 President Arthur Cheliotis, a member of the MLC bargaining committee, in a subsequent interview. "We were able to keep co-pays to the doctors off the table . . . and this is nothing more than what is being paid in all the other plans anyway."

He also expressed optimism that layoffs of permanent civil servants would not occur later this year, noting that "in three months, we're closer to the election, so in three months, there are greater political consequences to the layoffs . . . it gives us time to sit down with the city and explore options. The Mayor's going to have to look at all of these proposals that District Council 37 has made, I think many of them are legitimate."

DC 37's "white paper" proposals to cut privately-contracted services to save the city money and protect civil service jobs were mentioned by the Mayor at the press conference.

'Show Us How to Save'

"[DC 37 Executive Director] Lillian [Roberts] has been working with [Deputy Mayor Edward] Skyler trying to identify things where she thinks it's possible, and Ed will talk to the commissioners and see if they think it's realistic," the Mayor said. "If somebody can show us a way to save money, we want to do that."

Social Service Employees Local 371 President Faye Moore, whose members would bear the brunt of the layoffs still in the budget, said that she was willing to do whatever she could to protect members' jobs, even if it meant transferring them out of social service agencies temporarily.

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"Ultimately we want to get people into social service jobs, but in this economy, maybe the best thing right now is to keep people employed, and then try to get them back to their professions," she said. "That's what happened in the '70s, that's what happened in the early '90s."

Ms. Moore said she was concerned about "the programs that were going to be eliminated through this headcount reduction," worrying that while her members might survive layoffs for three months, the programs would not.

'Keep Our Workers in Place'

"Our position is: keep our workers in place, keep the programs in the agencies, because we were doing them right, rather than have that gap where you have to send out the request for proposals, and vet people and all that," she said. "We're already here, so keep us and don't spend that money on a contractor."

She also noted that the number of threatened layoffs had been cut nearly in half over the past month. "Layoffs are almost always political and rarely economical," Ms Moore said. "When they put out the layoff notices, 1,500 came to DC 37, of those, 1,000 were permanent, over 600 were ours, and then we'd get to meetings and it'd be reduced by one, or 10. . . this isn't just a function of this administration, this always happens, it's almost part of the script. You start with a high number, then just chip away."



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