

'Nothing Can Stop It'

Unions Infuriated As State Mails 891 Layoff Notices

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By MARK TOOR |

New York State mailed layoffs notices as scheduled Dec. 10 to 891 state employees, with frustrated unions launching public-relations offensives but unable to fight the move in court as they had hoped.

"Every employee targeted for layoff will have received notification by the end of today," Erik Kriss, a spokesman for the state Division of Budget, said on Dec. 10. The layoffs take effect "at the close of business Dec. 31," he said earlier in the week.

No-Layoff Pledge Expires

The date the layoffs take effect is key. Governor Paterson had signed a pledge with state-employee unions promising no layoffs for the rest of his term in return for their support of a new, less-expensive pension tier. He later disavowed the pledge, saying the state could no longer afford to keep it. But the unions had planned to use the no-layoff agreement as a basis for a court challenge of any reductions in headcount.

However, the pledge runs out Dec. 31, the last day of Mr. Paterson's term—and the day the layoffs become effective.

"They found a legal loophole to get away with this," said Steven Madarasz, a spokesman for the Civil Service Employees Association. "...Legally there's not anything we can do to stop it at this point."

"There are no more legal strategies at this point," agreed Darcy Wells, a spokeswoman for the Public Employees Federation.

Mr. Kriss said the state would lose 898 positions by Jan. 1, as planned, but that fewer people may actually be laid off. For example, he said, a cook may be laid off from one correctional facility but then hired by another that has an opening. "The system eliminates a position but the guy isn't on the street," he said in an interview.

He said the number of layoffs will shrink as openings are filled in this fashion, particularly in the Department of Correctional Services and the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, and as other workers decide to retire rather than be laid off.

Both unions issued statements blasting Mr. Paterson over the layoffs.

'A Dark Day for State'

"This is a dark day for the state of New York as more than 900 hard-working and committed state employees are formally notified they are being laid off. It is an action that is unnecessary and unconscionable," PEF President Kenneth Brynien said. "Not only are these individuals facing incredible hardships, their families are suffering, taxpayers will be impacted through the loss of services and the local economy will suffer as well. Governor David Paterson should be ashamed that the final act of his administration will be to punish union members and their families because he wanted to score cheap political points.

"Paterson will no doubt try and place blame on the unions. He will claim these layoffs could have been avoided and on that point, we agree. Time and again, the Governor was presented with many options for cost reductions but instead he chose to cut the jobs of 900 workers. We have tried to reason with Governor Paterson on numerous occasions to point out several other options to achieve needed savings. Continued news reports that PEF refused to negotiate with the Governor on how to help close the budget deficit are just plain inaccurate. There were no meetings, no discussions and a refusal on the Governor's part to even consider our ideas."

"Everyone but the Governor and some other politicians seem to understand that laying people off is bad for the economy," said CSEA President Danny Donohue. "It takes away paychecks that would be spent in local communities, loses taxes that would otherwise be paid and eliminates front-line employees who actually deliver necessary services that help generate revenue..."

"The layoff plan is nothing but political spite for CSEA holding him to a negotiated contract and his no-layoff pledge, as his administration

mishandled every opportunity for cooperation,” he continued. “The Governor should think long and hard about whether he wants to end his administration with 900 employees following him out the door on Jan. 1 and leaving a lasting legacy of failure.”

He Zigs, They Zag

Mr. Paterson has insisted he wanted \$250 million in savings from the state payroll to help balance the budget. He tried to get it by asking the unions for a lag payroll, but they said one was already in effect and another was too much. He asked them to forgo a 4-percent raise scheduled for April 1 of this year, but they declined, saying the raise had already been negotiated. Then he ordered the raise withheld and state workers furloughed, but a Federal Judge said he couldn't do either.

His early-retirement incentive abolished thousands of jobs, but PEF said at least 600 of its members sought to take it but were turned down, and CSEA said it wasn't even offered to thousands more workers.

As the Budget Division was still totaling the results of the retirement incentive, Mr. Paterson announced that it had come up short of saving the \$250 million. He ordered that another 2,000 jobs be cut by attrition or layoff. The result: 898 layoffs.

“This is not about money,” Mr. Madarasz told the Plattsburgh Press Republican. “It’s about the Governor having an opportunity to do some political payback.” The unions have said Mr. Paterson never sat down with them for negotiations, instead announcing cost-cutting initiatives in the press and declining their suggestions for other government cuts such as fewer high-priced consultants.

‘People Work, Layoffs Don’t’

CSEA has launched an advertising campaign with the slogan “People Work, Layoffs Don’t.” A broadcast ad says, “Jobs mean people spend paychecks in the community...mean people will pay their bills and taxes.” PEF’s campaign, which started last month, shows empty desks and ringing phones with the overline, “State workforce reductions jeopardize state services.”

The next man in the Governor’s chair, Attorney General Andrew Cuomo, has promised a one-year pay freeze for state workers and a reduction of the size of government—most likely including government employees—at all levels in the state.

