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Failure To Ratify Union Deal Hurts Entire State

Concessions Rejected: Massive layoffs, cuts are the only response to employees' refusal to do their share

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The looming failure of a sufficient number of unionized state workers to ratify a reasonable concessions agreement that would balance the state budget is a needless tragedy that will hurt all of Connecticut — starting with the workers themselves.

They were asked by their union leadership to vote in favor of as good an agreement as they could expect: basically, a two-year wage freeze, then 3 percent raises in each of the next three years, and modest restrictions on their health and retirement benefits, in exchange for a four-year no-layoff guarantee.

In this fragile economy, who but public-sector workers get such iron-clad job security at so little cost?

The agreement would have contributed \$1.6 billion over two years toward eliminating a \$3.5 billion deficit. Tax increases are good for another \$1.5 billion; spending cuts and new, unanticipated revenue would make up the rest.

A majority of the 45,000-plus workers who have a vote are expected to support the deal, despite setbacks in key unions during the week. But when the voting concludes Friday, the agreement — part of Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's "shared sacrifice" budget-balancing blueprint — is unlikely to reach the required 80 percent threshold of support.

That dooms the deal between the Malloy administration and the employees' bargaining coalition.

It's an astounding development, considering how little, really, was asked of workers.

Now come the layoffs

What happens next — if Mr. Malloy keeps his word — was well understood in advance. The governor, who was elected with strong union support, will present a new plan to balance the budget that will call for more spending cuts and the layoffs of up to 7,500 state workers.

This alternative plan will cause misery to thousands of families and will degrade state services even more. But it's not the governor's fault. There's no way around the additional budget carnage now that most of the employee votes are in.

Mr. Malloy can't honorably break, nor do we expect that he would, his pledge against seeking more than the \$1.5 billion in tax increases that the General Assembly has already given him. The huge, historic tax increase is the taxpayers' share of the pain.

That leaves reductions in payroll, in programs, and in state aid to towns and cities as the means to cover the gap — \$700 million in the fiscal year beginning July 1 and about \$900 million the following year — left by the unions' failure to do their part.

This won't be a picnic for anybody. It means poorer-quality state services, poorer-quality municipal services and perhaps higher local property taxes, depending on how far the state-aid faucet is turned toward off.

Mr. Malloy must resist the temptation to use surplus revenues to plug the hole in next year's budget. Surplus revenue should be used to retire debt or meet pension obligations, not to soften the sting of employees' failure to do their part to balance the budget. Indeed, the governor's budget director, Ben Barnes, said Tuesday that using the surplus in such a way "would be at odds with many of the statements" Mr. Malloy has made.

State employee selfishness

Mr. Malloy had presented a workable, fair budget-balancing plan. Taxpayers will be on the hook for their part when the new taxes authorized by the governor and lawmakers kick in. The legislature approved the spending cuts.

Only the unions said no because not enough of their members said yes.

State employees' selfishness will lose them support in Connecticut. Their friends in the strongly pro-union General Assembly would do well to listen.
