

Union Voting Begins, Integrity of Vote Called Into Question By Some

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Christine Stuart file photo

Matt O'Connor, spokesman for SEIU CT State Council and SEBAC

Union leaders are optimistic the labor agreement reached with Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's administration will be ratified despite vocal opponents questioning the integrity of the voting process.

The agreement would protect employees from layoffs for four years. Their wages would be frozen for two years but they would receive 3 percent raises for the next three consecutive years. The tentative agreement also makes changes to health care benefits, including the implementation of a controversial "value based" health care plan that would require employees to attend regular checkups and try to live healthier.

In order for the agreement to be adopted, 14 of 15 unions, or 80 percent of those voting, will need to ratify it. The voting process could take as long as three weeks, as it did back in 2009 when changes to the 1997 agreement were ratified by SEBAC members.

State Employee Bargaining Agent Coalition spokesman Matt O'Connor said a few unions, mostly those representing higher education employees, began the voting process last week. The process will continue until June 24.

But there is some distrust among members regarding the process and a strong opposition movement encouraging members to vote against the agreement. Several union members have also emailed CTNewsJunkie with questions regarding how the vote will be counted, how that 80 percent will be calculated and what sort of oversight the process will have. Others have posted their opinions on blogs like Votenoconcessions.com and Wisdomvertime.wordpress.com

One member said he could not locate language in the union's bylaws requiring the 80 percent vote or specifying how it is calculated. However, section 10 of SEBAC's bylaws state the agreement requires a "four-fifths majority of representatives in good standing and not more than one bargaining agent voting in opposition."

O'Connor likened the process to the presidential Electoral College. Unions vary in the size of their membership, and their votes are weighted depending on that size, he said.

Larry Dorman, another SEBAC spokesman, used AFSCME, which has around 17,000 members as an example. If 10,000 members were to vote for the agreement and 7,000 voted against it, those votes would be cast as a yes vote for AFSCME, he said.

But one member said that system lends itself to rigging and dropping a piece of paper into a cardboard box gives few members confidence.

“This is outrageous and is not logical, unless you’re attempting to fix the vote to pass the most difficult aspect. The correct way is to let all votes stand as they have been cast, report those for and against numbers to SEBAC and combine all the yays and nays and arrive at a true membership percentage,” he wrote.

But O’Connor said the 80 percent rule really only affects AFSCME.

“AFSCME is a bit of an outlier only because it’s the only union in the coalition largest enough in terms of its membership that the 80 percent rule even really matters,” he said.

Because the other unions are smaller their votes aren’t weighted heavily enough to make up 20 percent, he said.

“It’s written into the bylaws, so it should be mentioned, but really the more important threshold is the 14 of 15 unions voting to approve the agreement,” O’Connor said.

Members have also expressed concern over how the voting process will be monitored and whether or not an impartial third party would have oversight of it. O’Connor said the process is as transparent as possible but pointed out that the specifics of how votes are cast are really up to each individual union. Much like how each state in the nation decides its own voting process, each element of the coalition sets its own rules.

“It really is a very loose knit coalition but it does have bylaws that spell out the benchmarks for the threshold for the passage of any sort of agreement that SEBAC has authority over,” he said.

The coalition only has authority over health care and retirement security issues. Still there are common characteristics to each of the 15 unions’ voting standards, he said. For instance, each vote must be conducted openly for members to witness and the ballots are generally preserved for some length time after the vote, he said.

Members looking for specifics about the process can find them spelled out in their union’s individual constitution, he said.

Will there be a third party overseeing the votes of each union and their subsequent bargaining units?

“We’re not inviting the Carter Center in if that’s what you’re asking,” O’Connor joked.

O’Connor and Dorman said they’ve found members are warming up to the deal as they become educated about what it actually contains. They aren’t necessarily rejoicing, hopping up and down and shouting thank you but many are accepting it, O’Connor said. Much of that acceptance comes from seeing what is transpiring in other states, he said.

The Massachusetts legislature, for instance, recently passed a measure restricting the collective bargaining rights of municipal labor unions, he said. If the governor signed that bill into law, it would be “earth-shattering,” he said.

“That’s the context in which the members of our unions are weighing this very heavy decision,” he said.

Here in Connecticut, many conservatives have denounced the agreement as too generous to unions and terrible for taxpayers. That rhetoric may actually be encouraging members to adopt it, O’Connor said.

However, Malloy’s talk of upwards of 7,500 layoffs should the agreement not be ratified has been counterproductive, he said.

“It’s never helpful to hear discussion of layoffs and service cuts,” he said, calling it unappreciated.

Dorman said he understands Malloy’s budget, approved by the legislature, is contingent on the agreement’s passage but said “it’s never helpful to hear discussion of layoffs and service cuts,” he said, calling it a distraction.

Malloy said Monday he has no further plans to engage the unions before June 24th, saying it’s the responsibility of union leadership to explain and answer questions about the agreement. He said Lt. Gov. Nancy Wyman has also been made available to help.