

Past givebacks, delayed info hurt Conn. labor deal

SUSAN HAIGH, Associated Press

Updated 12:34 p.m., Sunday, June 26, 2011

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — The \$1.6 billion labor concessions deal that public employee unions rejected last week in a major blow to Gov. [Dannel P. Malloy](#) protected so many benefits for workers that even critics said it was sure to pass: Workers would keep their pensions and health benefits and receive a guarantee of no layoffs for the next four years.

Now that the unions represented by the [State Employees Bargaining Agent Coalition](#) have voted the deal down, the new Democratic governor is preparing to issue as many as 7,500 layoff notices to help close the budget shortfall.

Union leaders say there is no single explanation for why the rank-and-file voted against the deal. But they and others involved in the process blame factors including alleged misinformation spread by outside groups, resentment over past labor concessions, bitterness over the governor's threat of layoffs, concern that higher taxes weren't imposed on the wealthy and individuals' selfishness.

Union leaders are also asking themselves whether they did enough to sell the deal.

"Did we do a good (job), did we do a bad job? We'll be analyzing that. I can tell you that we did our due diligence," said [Matt O'Connor](#), a SEBAC spokesman. He said SEBAC held numerous informational sessions and the individual unions held many meetings and informational sessions over the past several weeks.

O'Connor said union leaders had to combat a misinformation campaign from outside groups, much of it in messages sent via social media and passed along by state employees to their colleagues. He said some members claim they were also encouraged by their managers, some holdovers from past Republican administrations, to vote no.

Additionally, SEBAC has accused the [Yankee Institute](#), a conservative think tank, of sending out a bogus email from a state email account to union members, trying to discourage them from ratifying the deal. State auditors have been asked to review the accusations, which the institute has strongly denied.

In a letter to the auditors Friday, Yankee Institute Executive Director [Fergus Cullen](#) accused SEBAC of using his organization as a scapegoat for the deal's failure. He said it was posterous to think the institute hacked into the state's email system.

"It sounds like a scene out of 'Mission: Impossible' and it reflects the paranoid fantasy world in which SEBAC lives. Yankee Institute has no such computer hacking skills. I don't even use Twitter," Cullen said.

Jon Pepe is president of the 1,850-member [Connecticut State Prison Employees](#), the union local whose negative vote triggered the overall defeat of the agreement. A supporter of the deal, Pepe said he had to combat misinformation about the proposed changes to state employees' health care benefits such as a new, voluntary health care plan that requires participants to get annual physicals and age-appropriate medical tests.

Many workers, he said, were convinced the new program was Sustinet, a proposed universal health care concept that has been discussed by lawmakers for years but has not become law. Other members, Pepe said, were mistakenly convinced they would not be able to use their current doctors.

Pepe said the naysayers seized on the Memorial Day holiday weekend, when workers were anxiously waiting to read the details of the agreement that had just been announced, and went "crazy with the misinformation and all the gloom and doom."

He said those sentiments became engrained by the time leadership began holding informational sessions.

There was also a feeling among some workers that they had given up enough in past contract battles, Pepe said.

"Every time we went for a contract, every time there's a budget, state employees have to give back," he said.

Mike Alewitz, an associate professor at [Central Connecticut State University](#) who voted no, said the looming layoffs are unnecessary and more should be done to tax Connecticut's super-rich, not burden the middle class.

"There is absolutely no reason why anyone has to be laid off," he said. "What they want to do is weaken state unions long term. That is what's happening state after state, around the country."

State employees, he said, had to choose between voting against the agreement knowing there was no good alternative, or voting for something they didn't agree with, namely the concessions.

Among other concessions, the deal called for a two-year wage freeze, with no salary increases for individuals who have reached the top step in the job classification. Following the freeze, however, workers would receive 3 percent pay increases in each of the next three fiscal years, along with

annual increments that may be due. The plan did not include any furlough days.

It also made changes to the state's pension system, including a reduction in the minimum cost-of-living adjustment. It increased the normal retirement age by two years for new hires or any current employee who retires after July 1, 2022 in an effort to encourage older state employees to retire sooner, possibly this year.

As of Friday, two of the 15 unions represented by SEBAC had defeated the agreement. That was enough to sink the entire package because SEBAC rules require 14 out of 15 unions to approve any changes to a coveted, 20-year benefits agreement that's not set to expire until 2017.

Dawn Tyson, 35, a processing technician at the Department of Social Services who supported the agreement, said she thought it was the best deal workers could get in difficult economic times. She's angry that members of her clerical bargaining unit, which voted for the deal, will now face layoffs.

"They passed it because they understand job security in an economic time when there's really no security elsewhere," said Tyson, a single mother like many of her co-workers.

Tyson said she blames the defeat on what she considers to be a "selfish society."

"I believe in the process and I don't believe that the process failed us. I believe that we failed the process and that people more or less made choices that were selfish and not for the common welfare of those involved," she said. "Most people looked at their years and service and figured, 'I'm not going to be touched and I'm going to be out of here in a few years and it's not going to affect me.'"

Alewitz disagreed.

"I don't think people voted for selfish reasons, quite the opposite. I think that people voted no because they know they're being bullied," he said. "Contracts don't mean anything if they're continuously reopened and gutted."

.....