



WRGB-TV, Albany, NY, June 2, 2009

With state layoffs looming, who will budge?

By Steve Flamisch

The clock is ticking. Unless the governor or the unions budge, thousands of state workers could be laid off beginning on July 1.

Corrections officers would take the biggest hit, with 2,021 of the rank-and-file slated to be axed unless the New York State Corrections Officers and Police Benevolent Association (NYSCOPBA) makes certain concessions.

"We have limited coverage, and we believe any more cuts would cause serious problems and serious safety risks within the system," NYSCOPBA President Donn Rowe said during a rally outside the State Capitol on Tuesday.

NYSCOPBA admittedly paid members \$100 apiece to attend the rally, but the union insists the money was intended to cover their travel expenses.

Regarding the potential threat to public safety, New York State Department of Correctional Services (DOCS) spokesman Erik Kriss fired back that corrections officers are using scare tactics.

"The record shows that there is no impact on safety," Kriss said. "We are just running the system more efficiently and more intelligently."

Though the union insists its members are taking an unfair hit, Kriss noted there are 19,000 officers in the prisons compared to 900 employees in central administration. The cuts, he reasoned, are proportional.

Governor Paterson has warned that the entire state workforce would be trimmed if the ten labor un-

ions do not agree to certain concessions including forgoing their negotiated three percent raise, contributing more to their pension plans, and postponing five days of pay until they leave state service. Paterson also wants to raise the minimum retirement age from 55 to 62.

Spokespeople from the Civil Service Employees Association and the Public Employees Federation said Tuesday that their unions are engaged in "conversations" with the governor's office.

Meanwhile, the Division of Budget reported that 1,200 positions have already been eliminated through attrition and retirements, dropping the number of possible layoffs statewide from 8,900 to 7,700.

But Robert Ward, Deputy Director of SUNY's Rockefeller Institute of Government, said he thinks far fewer employees will actually be cut. Historically, he said, mass layoffs have been averted.

"Whether there ends-up being any layoffs," Ward said, "I think [that] is open to question."

Thousands of workers typically resign or retire every year, he said. And while fewer may do so in 2009 simply because of the poor economy, enough may leave of their own volition to avoid painful cuts, he said.

So didn't Paterson know that when he proposed the layoffs?

"Well, in tough times you need to do more than the historical average," Ward said.