

Unions to Astorino: Bring cuts to bargaining table

Written by

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Union leaders have a message for Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino: We'll see you at the negotiating table.

Responding to Astorino's call for concessions and for workers to pay more for their health benefits, some union leaders said they fully expect it to be part of contract talks — but it won't be public fodder.

"We're not negotiating in the media," said Karen Pecora, president of the county's largest union, Civil Service Employees Association, representing about 4,000 members. "We have a contract that expires at the end of the year, and at that time, that's when it will be negotiated.

"He can want all he wants, but it has to be negotiated," she said. "When we sit down, that's when it will be discussed."

Astorino used part of his State of the County Address Thursday to reiterate his jobs-for-savings mantra and to call on labor to pay part of their health-care premiums, which they currently do not.

If they did, that would generate \$10 million in savings, he said.

The county has eight unions for its workers, which include Teamsters (management), nurses, police and correction and related groups for superior officers like sergeants and captains.

Six do not have current contracts, and two expire at the end of the year.

Unlike his first address one year ago when he threatened layoffs, furloughs and buyouts, the first-term Republican executive said there is no more "low-hanging fruit" and that incentives this go-around would not be forthcoming. He urged the unions to take a "we", not "me" mentality.

"It is impossible to see how we can avoid layoffs if concessions are not forthcoming from our unions," Astorino said during his one-hour speech in the Board of Legislators Chambers. "Once again, I am extending the offer to save jobs in return

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for savings. ... It is time for our union employees to start contributing to their health-care costs."

It's fine to have a "wish list," and that's all part of the give-and-take of contract talks, said Robert Buckley, president of the Westchester County Correction Superior Officers Association, representing specialists, sergeants, captains and assistant wardens at Westchester County jail.

But it's not something they will solve through press releases or a public back-and-forth, Buckley said.

"The county executive has a right to put any demands he wishes, just as we do," he said. "That's what the negotiation process is about."

Astorino's call comes amid a national backlash against government and union workers, in part from people frustrated with rising taxes and what they perceive are overly generous wages, benefits and pensions.

Organized labor, particularly teachers, public safety and other government workers, are bearing the brunt of those criticisms.

The political rancor is obvious in Washington, where a government shutdown was narrowly averted.

Westchester faces no such showdown (not yet, anyway), but Astorino said rising

mandates from Albany and Washington, coupled with pension and health-care costs, are cannibalizing tax dollars.

Rising pension and health-care costs — combined at \$192 million this year and projected to reach roughly \$265 million by 2015 — are reasons why the county is in jeopardy of "having a work force it can no longer afford," Astorino said.

When benefits are factored in, the average cost of a county worker will be \$117,000 per year, he said.

"Our problem is not managerial. It's purely mathematical," Astorino said. "We have a pay structure that can no longer be sustained."

Pecora said CSEA workers seem to be unfairly targeted, and she challenged Astorino's calculations; they don't reflect what her members make. On average, they make about \$60,000 a year and receive a pension of \$16,000 per year, she said.

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"It's ridiculous," she said of the estimate.
"It's totally ridiculous."

The unions and their contracts

- Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA): expires Dec. 31, 2011.
- Teamsters — Managerial (MGMT): expired Dec. 31, 2008.
- Police Benevolent Association (PBA): expired Dec. 31, 2008.
- Superior Officers Police Benevolent Association (SPBA): expired Dec. 31, 2008.
- United Federation of Police (UFPO): expired Dec. 31, 2006.
- New York State Nurses Association (NURSE): expires Dec. 31, 2011.
- Correction Officers Benevolent Association (COBA): expired Dec. 31, 2008.
- Correction Superior Officers Association (SOA): expired Dec. 31, 2008.

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