

Westchester union faults Astorino's budget, says exec pits taxpayers against workers

WHITE PLAINS — In a push back at County Executive Rob Astorino and his job cutting, members of the county's largest union say they've been unfairly targeted, disrespected and left out of contract talks: They accused Astorino of lying to the public and being a bully with workers.

It's a notion that the county executive rejects.

Dozens of CSEA workers stood in front of the county office building Tuesday and blasted Astorino for presenting his "jobs for savings" plan to the public and press, but not to members at the negotiating table.

They said he's lying about the process and his strategy is about pitting taxpayers against union workers.

"I have never seen his jobs for savings plan," Karen Pecora, president of CSEA 9200, the county's largest union that

represents roughly 3,800 workers, as she stood next to union leaders and rank-and-file staffers. "If he wants a response, he needs to give it to us."

The spat between Westchester County unions and Astorino is a microcosm of what's going on across the country: workers say they've earned their benefits and are unfairly being blamed while government leaders say labor costs are out of control and a reason why taxes are so high.

The system, they argue, is too generous and unsustainable.

Since taking office in 2010, the Republican executive has publicly asked the county's workforce to start paying a portion of their health care premiums as a way of saving jobs.

This year, Astorino proposed

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eliminating 357 jobs, including 210 through layoffs, in his \$1.69 billion budget because he has not been able to get concessions.

Those concessions would save \$19 million and jobs, he said.

All Astorino is asking is that workers follow the lead of their state counterparts who pay a percentage of health costs, he has said.

There are eight county unions — six working with expired contracts and two set to expire this month — and none of them pay a percentage of their premiums.

During an Editorial Board meeting of The Journal News on Tuesday, Astorino acknowledged he was focusing on CSEA, mostly because they are the largest body and haven't been reasonable.

"The system is broken, there's no question about it," Astorino said, citing the state's Triborough Amendment to the Taylor Law, which stipulates that absent a new contract an existing one remains in place.

"I'm not signing a contract unless health care is part of the package. ... It's time for the largest union to come

to the table."

The administration would not provide a copy of any specific proposal made to the union to the press, but said they would if CSEA was agreeable and released theirs as well.

For its part, the Board of Legislators is poised to add back as many as 180 jobs into the budget. They are scheduled to vote on a plan Thursday.

Union leaders say they are hopeful lawmakers will restore jobs and programs slated to be cut and that they've met with the Astorino administration 10 times.

Negotiations are complex and can take several years, they maintain.

"We can disagree, but talk to us, not at us," said John Staino, president of

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Westchester Local 860, which includes 14,000 members across the county. "It's not a bully pulpit. I don't think he respects us. He's not respecting CSEA."



Mayor Philip A. Amicone and other officials unfurl a sign for the new "daylighting" of the Saw Mill River in Yonkers on Dec. 6, 2011. (Carucha L. Meuse / The Journal News)



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 Karen Pecora, president of CSEA 9200, the largest union representing Westchester County employees, discusses County Executive Rob Astorino's 2012 budget on Tuesday in White Plains. / Seth Harrison/The Journal News

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