

## Contract battle goes public

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WHITE PLAINS — The tension that has built over months of fruitless, closed-door contract talks between Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano and the county's largest labor union erupted into the open last week, when Spano's top deputy posted the county's latest offer on bulletin boards in several county buildings and the union followed hours later with an e-mail advising members that it was at "war" with the administration.

Frustration over the stalled talks with the Civil Service Employees Association also is building on the Board of Legislators, where all 17 members will be on the ballot in November. Union members for several months have been attending legislature meetings to warn that they will work to defeat members who don't support the settlement the union wants.

Two weeks ago, union members rallied at the home of Democrat George Latimer of Rye, chairman of the legislature's Labor Committee. Union members say they will rally next at the White Plains home of Deputy County Executive Larry Schwartz.

The political pressure to settle is less intense for Spano, a Democrat who will not be up for re-election until 2005. Spano received the union's support in both of his previous campaigns.

On Friday, while Clinton Young, the leader of the legislature's Democratic majority, was asserting that his caucus "has demonstrated that we've stood with labor all along," Schwartz was blasting the union for its "irresponsible and immature" declaration of war.

"They should be negotiating around the clock to reach a settlement rather than spending their efforts threatening legislators up for re-election, rather than putting up misleading information on bulletin boards, rather than declaring war," Schwartz said. He waved off questions about whether the stalemate with the CSEA could cost Spano the union's support in 2005, saying, "There's no quid pro quo here."

A much more immediate concern for Spano is to contain the cost of the new contract with the CSEA, which often sets the standard for many of the county's other civilian unions, in the face of worsening budget news. In all, the county has nine unions representing about 5,700 civil servants, police, correction officers, nurses, professors, criminal investigators and middle-level managers — all of whom are working without contracts.

Last month, a leading Wall Street analyst warned the county that the escalating pressures on its budget, including the outstanding union contracts, could cause Westchester to lose its AAA credit rating. Such a downgrade would mean that it would cost the county more to borrow money. Budget Director Kate Carrano already has warned that the county may have to

increase property tax collections nearly 30 percent next year to keep its budget balanced, even without increasing union salaries.

CSEA President Jack McPhillips posted notices on bulletin boards two weeks ago asserting that Spano was offering annual salary increases averaging 1.7 percent between Jan. 1, 2002, when the union's contract expired, and June 30, 2005, which McPhillips said the union rejected.

Schwartz posted his response Wednesday. He said Spano has offered to give union members a lump-sum payment of 2 percent for 2002 that would not be considered part of a worker's salary — meaning that the base salary for future raises would not increase — followed by 4 percent salary increases this year and in 2004.

Hours later, union Vice President Karen Pecora sent e-mail to hundreds of union members advising that the Schwartz posting contained "out-and-out lies, whose sole purpose is to destroy the union. Please stay positive, but know that this is a war now, and we will prevail."

McPhillips followed up with a bulletin board posting Thursday telling members that negotiators for the county never formally offered the terms described by Schwartz, adding that in any case, the lump-sum payment for 2002 that Schwartz outlined was unacceptable.

"Deputy County Executive Larry Schwartz is well aware that our demonstrations have been successful and that his neighborhood was next," McPhillips said. "We have our members' support and the county will apparently do anything to tear our union apart."

The dispute will move to the legislature tomorrow, when the Rules Committee will consider a Republican proposal to give the CSEA the 4 percent salary increase it is seeking for 2002. The measure has been introduced as a resolution, however, meaning it would have no legal force.

Legislator Young, co-chairman of the Rules Committee, said that while the board's Democratic majority wants "to make a strong statement" supporting the CSEA, the resolution is illegal because it would inject the legislature into the contract negotiations. Although the legislature can ultimately impose a settlement, that can't happen until negotiations are exhausted. In the meantime, Young said, "It's embarrassing that this has been made to linger for such a long period of time."

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