

ALLEGATIONS FLY AS MINNESOTA'S WORKER CONTRACTS STALEMATE CONTINUES



Republican legislators have raised apprehensions about the slow pace and lack of transparency in negotiations between, the government and Minnesota's state employee unions and have accused them of "dragging their feet." Even though the talks began last spring, they have not produced any agreement. Until a solution is found, the terms in the old contract continue. The contracts expired almost 10 months ago. The divide between union's expectations and the government's response is becoming greater and greater with each passing day. Rep. Steve Drazkowski, R-Mazeppa said that he was worried about the potential cost of the delay and would put taxpayers at a disadvantage. Gov. Mark Dayton's administration is in the middle of discussions with several unions, including two of America's largest - the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees. Sen. Mike Parry, R-Waseca, said on Tuesday, April 24, that some union members confided in him and said that they were deliberately and calculatedly delaying the matter and hoping that a legislature more understanding of their cause, would be voted into power, come this November's election. For the first time in decades, Republicans are in control of both the House and Senate. "They're purposely slowing down the process of contract negotiations," Parry said. Union reps and Gov. Dayton have refuted Parry's denied his claims. Gov. Dayton said that the delays are because the state and union negotiators are still unable to reconcile their differences on some noteworthy issues. "We're doing what we can to get them resolved. We want to do it responsibly and we want to do it in a way that gives the taxpayers the best value," he said. Richard Kolodziejki, legislative affairs director for Minnesota Association of Professional Employees said, that negotiations were more complex and touchy owing to the 20-day state government shutdown last year and existing budget problems in Minnesota. Countering statements that the delay was intentional, he said, "No one benefits from a stalemate in negotiations. Our members want to settle a contract. And we want to settle a contract for our members." Rep. Drazkowski said, "We have these contracts continuing on auto pilot. On auto pilot, progression increases in steps and lanes and addition employer, i.e. taxpayer contributions to health insurance that are un-negotiated, that amount over the biennium to about \$140 million." A bill, preventing public employees and governments from extending a union contract beyond its expiration date, is awaiting clearance by the Legislature. It has already been cleared by the Senate and the House. Advocates of the bill believe that it will keep costs under control, by not allowing wage hikes, or increases to state's insurance contributions. All these, if required, will have to be renegotiated. However, it is believed that Gov. Dayton is not in approval of the bill and is not expected to sign the legislation. Moreover, the closeness of the vote, with which it was passed in the Minnesota House of Representatives, 68-to-63, indicates that there are not enough votes to reverse a veto. Meanwhile the stalemate continues.

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