

TEACHER LAYOFFS CAUSING HEARTBURN AND LOSS IN MORALE



Teachers in California have coined a new term, "the RIFing season," dreading the pink slips that have become a common occurrence, informing teachers that their service may not be required for the new academic years, the RIF being an acronym for "reduction in force," that school managements are enforcing, owing to budgetary considerations, induced by reduced state-funding. Mike Newman, a teacher in Los Angeles, has received his fourth pink slip in four years, but somehow manages to get his layoffs overturned but is unsure of whether he will manage to rescind this one as well. "Here we go again," he said. "We keep thinking it'll get better sooner or later, but it's not." Most teachers want the practice of sending letters in advance annulled because it is demoralizing for the teachers, incurs unnecessary administrative expenses and sets into motion, a chain of events, by the laid-off employees, that are aimed at saving their job. The Legislative Analyst's Office calculated costs about \$700 per noticed teacher, totaling \$14 million on administrative costs last year, in the school districts. In March, school districts had sent out 20,000 forewarning notices, for the fourth year running. However, it is seen that only around 5,000 of the forewarned employees actually lose their jobs. Warren Fletcher, president of United Teachers Los Angeles, the teachers union for the Los Angeles Unified School District, where a considerable number of teachers had received layoff letters in March said, "This is a process that doesn't need to be happening. This is a quarter of our teachers. The district couldn't operate without a quarter of its teachers. They never should've issued that number." Even accounting for the teachers who had been issued warning notices and then had them rescinded, some 32,000 teachers did lose their jobs over the last three years, which is around 11 percent of the state's teacher workforce. Districts say that this anomaly in number of teaches warned and number of teachers actually laid-off, was because state-mandated deadlines in the budgeting process left them unsure and uncertain about how much the funding would be. Rather than not have enough money, they prefer to send extra-notices and then rescind them. Moreover, under state law, districts must notify teachers by March 15 that they could lose their jobs as of June 30. LAUSD's Chief Human Resources Officer Vivian Ekchian accepted that the layoff notices caused loss of morals, emotional turmoil for employees and was an avoidable expenditure that could be used to save teaching positions. "It's very difficult to maintain stability not knowing how many teachers we can employ," she said. "A lot of these teachers will not be laid off." Phyllis Bradford, senior director of human resources said, "I've seen teachers who have cried. Others have moved out of state, gone back to school. It's a very depressing time." In California, teachers who specialize in special subjects, or are qualified to teach in areas where there is a teacher shortage, such as special education, or science subjects and mathematics and those who can teach in multiple subjects and age ranges, stand better chance of escaping the layoff. California Teacher Association President Dean Vogel said, that the "solution is to get more money into the general fund." The teachers union is strongly backing the Schools and Local Public Safety Protection Act that would increase taxes on the wealthy, the increased revenue to be used in restoring funding to schools and police and fire services. Until a solution is found the anxiety will continue. Christine Aguilar, an elementary school teacher, who has been teaching for 8 years now, fears the seniority list is catching up to her as she sees more and more of her colleagues getting laid-off. "Every year, I think `will this be the year I'm not rescinded? Will it be my turn?'" she said. "This is just hanging over me."