

DEFENSE WORKERS FEAR FOR JOBS: BESEECH CONGRESS TO STOP THE AUTOMATIC CUTS



Employees at South Florida's aerospace industry are an agitated and worried lot. The continuing congressional inaction has made the chances of automatic cuts in U.S. defense spending, come January, a distinct possibility. Employees at Pratt & Whitney Rocketdyne say that the management's putting on hold both personal and corporate planning is an indication that all is not right and after January, they could find themselves out of their jobs. Just as his company has put its future programs on hold, so has Fernando Diaz, 37, deputy program manager for Pratt's RL-10 rocket engine, put on hold his plans for starting a family. He says that he and his wife are unsure if the time is right. Other employees describe the station as a ticking time-bomb waiting to explode. Some are worried about their children's college education others are putting off buying homes and are awaiting more clarity on their job security. Congress understands the serious consequences of the cuts and the alarm felt by the defense contractors is palpable. However, the difference is that whilst the Congress has got used to living with impasse and last-minute meeting of deadlines, the impacted have not and will create a huge hue and cry much to the discomfiture of the lawmakers. An employer sarcastically said that to call them "do nothing Congress" is wrong, "When you're required to make a decision and you don't make one, that is a decision," he said. This month it will be a year since lawmakers initiated the \$55 billion in defense cuts for the first year, to begin in early January, along with an equal amount of cuts in non-defense discretionary programs and agency budgets. The deal that ended a bitter fight on Capitol Hill over raising the debt limit will cut federal spending by \$1.2 trillion over 10 years. The election-year has further contributed to a resolution not being found and prompting both Democrats and Republicans to hold fast to their positions. The main bone of contention is that where Democrats were adamant on new tax revenues, the Republicans refused to consider them and said that the money should come from cuts to Medicare and other entitlement programs favored by Democrats. Employees at Pratt & Whitney say that work is not as bustling as before. The Space Shuttle program's termination and a consolidation of military engine programs have taken its toll. Employment at a helicopter operation is down to just 1600, way below the 8,000 in its halcyon days. But that's economy, they say, the current situation is of the Congress' own making and can be resolved if they have the intent. The Pratt & Whitney engineers said that there was no point pointing fingers at any side, "No blaming. Let's just fix it," they said. "Get the appropriate people to come together, set aside their differences and make a decision." They have appealed to their own elected official in Congress, Republican Representative Allen West, who promised the workers that he would cut short his current vacation and rush to Washington, if there was hope of reaching a deal that would help avert the cuts. A study commissioned by the Aerospace Industries Association estimates that the automatic defense cuts could ultimately lead to the loss of over 1 million jobs. Add non-defense cuts and the number grows to over 2 million. But with neither side willing to give an inch and the election campaigning reaching fever pitch, hopes of a compromise before America has a new President are dim.