

Dan Haar: Unions Wait Anxiously But Not Angrily For Malloy's Layoff Plan



Gov. Dannel P. Malloy in a December file photo. (Patrick Raycraft / The Hartford Courant)



By **Dan Haar · Contact Reporter**

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It's a fair bet that Gov. **Dannel P. Malloy** would be private citizen Dan Malloy today if organized labor, especially state employee unions, had not manned the phones and pounded the pavement for his 2014 re-election.

Malloy left labor largely unscathed in last year's budget battles. But the song is different this year.

Without offering details in advance, Malloy is signaling scant pay raises, reduced benefits, restructured pensions and, worst of all for state employees, layoffs — all with no heads-up for the union leaders who pushed him past Republican Tom Foley.

The L-word hasn't surfaced much at the Capitol in recent years. Malloy struck a deal in 2011: two years of pay freezes and some health plan savings in exchange for four years of no layoffs. Also, the legislature is brimming with pro-labor Democrats.

Now, layoffs could reach into the thousands — not just a few trims here and there, like a cut at the state Department of Labor last year after federal unemployment money ran out.

Malloy will seek 5.75 percent spending cuts across agencies, and 15 percent cuts in so-called discretionary spending over two years, "through service reductions, layoffs, efficiencies and gains at the collective bargaining table," according to a budget document circulating at the Capitol, generated by Malloy's office.

Five percent of the state workforce, in round numbers, totals 2,500 people. So we could see one of the biggest cutbacks not just in government but at any Connecticut employer since the recession ended six years ago.

With talks underway for state employee contracts that expire June 30 for more than 30 state unions, you might think Malloy would have given some kind of warning about this bombshell to his labor pals. But no.

He also hasn't asked the unions to reopen a pension and health benefits agreement that's good through 2022 — even though the documents show he'll rein in spending "by reducing long-term fringe benefit costs."

So they're hopping mad and feeling double-crossed, right?

Wrong.

"He's the governor and he will govern and we will discuss our issues with him," Lori Pelletier, president of the state AFL-CIO, said Tuesday. "I'm not going to jump to conclusions ... I may be upset tomorrow, but I don't want to prejudge what he has to say."

The top four AFL-CIO officials in the state, including powerful union presidents, are scheduled to sit down with Malloy Thursday. I'd like to have a drone in that confab.

There might come a time, soon, when Malloy and the unions feud openly. For now unionists blame a system that favors the 1 percent.

"What's wrong with the state budget is what's wrong with our state economy. Wealth is increasing, but almost all of it is going to a tiny, privileged few," Carmen Roda, an adult probation officer and president of the Judicial Professional Employees Union, said in a written release from AFT.

That, of course, is the same anger that propelled Sen. Bernie Sanders to a virtual tie in the Iowa caucus.

Pro-labor Democrats see a three-month slog. "This will be my 28th opening day," said Rep. Robert Godfrey, D-Danbury. And among 27 budget proposals by governors, he added, "not a one of them has ever been enacted into law."

In addition to cuts, Malloy will seek to move some line-item budgeting authority from the legislature to the executive branch — which would make layoffs easier. But that won't fly without a fight, Godfrey and others in the legislature said.

"I am upset. I come from a union family. I come from a district that is working class ... I'm not going to go after employees," Godfrey said. But he added, referring to Malloy, "He's doing his job, we'll do ours."

Godfrey said Malloy perhaps didn't talk in advance with union leaders and supporters in the legislature because the governor never served in the legislature, unlike all of his predecessors of the last generation. "He has a different point of view that's strongly executive."

Whatever Malloy owes to labor, he owes his ultimate loyalty to the citizens and taxpayers first, and if squeezing state employees is the only way out of this two-year, \$2 billion mess, so be it.

"I don't envy him," said Sen. [Beth Bye](#), D-West Hartford, co-chairwoman of the legislative committee that oversees spending. "Over the past four years, we have been doing our level best to protect employees ... The reason you're not hearing outrage is that we know the governor doesn't have too many more places to go."

Layoffs, if they happen, will come on top of a partial hiring freeze that's already shrinking state government. Malloy has reduced the payroll by 1,000 positions, and he said this year will bring 500 to 600 more.

Union leaders will argue that mass layoffs hurt the economy and communities. They will cling to the hope that Malloy and lawmakers will raise taxes on the rich and on profitable corporations — but it's clear there's no appetite for that in the public or at the Capitol.

Malloy, for his part, is pushing what he calls the harsh reality of an economy that isn't going to bounce back robustly. That won't soothe state workers who feel the brunt of it.

"We worked hard to make sure there was a person in the governor's office whose first thought was not to throw state employees to the wolves," said Pelletier, the AFL-CIO president.

Will she remind Malloy of all those neighborhood campaign sweeps, many of which she personally led? "I don't think I need to."

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