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By Valerie Bauman

NY public worker unions oppose reopening contracts

Three of New York's most powerful public employee unions say they won't reopen contracts to any concessions despite the state's fiscal crisis, delivering an early blow to Gov. David Paterson's plans to fill a \$2 billion deficit next week.

"I don't see any local leader wanting to come to the table to give something up," said Richard Iannuzzi, president of New York State United Teachers. "So, if there's an incentive being offered in exchange for what they would be giving up, then local leaders may entertain that."

Civil Service Employees Association President Danny Donohue said reopening contracts is "not acceptable."

It's unclear what incentives may sway employee unions, which carry tremendous power with lawmakers in Albany.

Ken Brynien, president of the Public Employees Federation, said "nothing that comes to mind" would be incentive enough for his union to reconsider opening labor talks.

"I don't believe that further reduction in staff would benefit the taxpayers of the state," he said. "We're having a difficult enough time providing services."

Paterson wants \$2 billion in spending cut from what remains of the \$120 billion 2008-2009 budget. He just returned Monday to New York from Puerto Rico, where he was attending a conference sponsored by the Assembly Puerto Rican/Hispanic Task Force. Paterson said the recession, overspending by the state and Wall Street's meltdown will result in \$47 billion in deficits over the next four years if nothing is done.

"The governor will be releasing his proposals later this week," spokesman Jeffrey Gordon said. "And he has said that, given the magnitude of our fiscal crisis, no area of state spending can be off the table."

The governor is expected to issue further budget-cutting proposals Wednesday.

The biggest chunks of the state's \$120 billion budget are Medicaid and school aid, which have historically been protected by the powerful unions. But Paterson has said billions of dollars in cuts next year and midyear cuts to school aid are all on the table.

Even if the unions agree to contract talks, it's unclear how much New Yorkers would know about the fiscal impact of contract negotiations before any agreements are ratified, said Lise Bang-Jensen, a senior fiscal policy analyst for the fiscally conservative Empire Center for New York State Policy. The state does often release a list of changes the contracts would include in advance, but that doesn't always include fiscal details.

In New York, details of collective bargaining agreements with public employee unions are at times under a "shroud of secrecy," offering local governments protection from public protest and the unions heavy sway during negotiations, Bang-Jensen said.

Johnson City, about 64 miles south of Syracuse, faced major shortfalls after the village board approved a new contract with the firefighters union to raise salaries by 33 percent in five years. Village officials later admitted salaries would actually go up by 41 percent in five years.

The village faces budget shortfalls and doesn't have enough money to pay firefighter salaries after Jan. 29, 2009.

"We're talking about a lot of money here, and the public should know in advance where it's going and how much is being spent," Bang-Jensen said.

Most of the biggest contracts in New York state spending are settled, including CSEA, PEF and the United University Professions.

Union officials say there are other ways to cut spending and supplement the budget without layoffs or concessions.

Those ideas would benefit unions by including tax hikes for the rich and eliminating the use of independent contractors instead of state employees.