

# February 17, 2003, Appleton Post-Crescent

## No one wins with rejection of state employees' contracts

Scott McCallum has come out as the villain again, in a bipartisan vote. Members of the state Legislature's Joint Committee on Employment Relations pointed the finger of blame at the former governor after rejecting contracts for state employees that the McCallum administration had negotiated in November, shortly after McCallum lost to Jim Doyle.

First, there's Assembly Minority Leader Jim Kreuser, D-Kenosha, telling *The Capital Times*, "Clearly, the past administration did a disservice to the current administration."

He was echoed by Rep. Dean Kaufert, R-Neenah, who said, "We've been dealt a pretty crummy hand by the previous administration."

Yup, crummy it was. But it was a fair negotiation with state employees unions that should have passed not just the committee but the Legislature, too. More than 30,000 workers haven't had a raise in 31 months and have been without a contract for almost two years.

The raises that were negotiated were small — a 1 percent retroactive raise from July 1, 2001; a 2 percent retroactive raise from July 1, 2002; and a 2.5 percent raise in April. According to the Legislative Fiscal Bureau, the contracts would cost \$30.6 million in this fiscal year and \$66 million in each of the next two fiscal years. There's about \$80 million in a compensation reserve fund, although that money would have also been spent on raises for non-union employees, who got a 6.7 percent raise in 2001-2003.

The bottom line, according to the Republican legislators — Kaufert; Rep. John Gard, R-Peshtigo; Rep. Steven Foti, R-Oconomowoc; Sen. Alan Lasee, R-Rockland; and Sen. Alberta Darling, R-River Hills — who voted against the contracts is the financial bottom line. They said the state can't afford the raises when it's facing a \$3.2 billion two-year deficit. However, Doyle had said he would find a way to fund the raises in the budget plan he's delivering on Tuesday.

Sen. Robert Welch, R-Redgranite, who has decried large raises for UW System officials and Doyle cabinet members, has been a voice of reason on the state employees' contracts.

"I think for the little guy working in state government, these are not raises that are extraordinary," he said last month. "They're under what a lot of other public employees are getting."

Sometimes, the financial bottom line has to defer to the moral bottom line. The legislators who voted against the contracts made the wrong choice.

Now, in the midst of many serious issues, here's one more that needs to be dealt with quickly. The Legislature has to try to convince the state employees unions to renegotiate; they're not budging so far. The unions have to decide how far they're willing to go, even if it costs them more layoffs. And the distrust will remain for a long time.

There are no winners here. This turned into a lose-lose situation. McCallum can't be blamed for all of it.