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Legislators still oppose contracts

By John Dipko

Press-Gazette Madison bureau

jdipko@greenbaypressgazette.com

MADISON — Two Northeastern Wisconsin lawmakers who lead a committee studying proposed worker contracts with the state still oppose them despite two days of missed work by hundreds of prison guards, apparently protesting inaction on the agreements.

Assembly Speaker John Gard, R-Peshtigo, co-chairman of the Legislature's Joint Committee on Employment Relations with Senate President Alan Lasee, R-Rockland, said he still would vote against the 15 contracts involving about 31,000 workers.

Lasee said that if the vote occurred Friday, he'd vote no. He referenced the recent announcement that Agrilink will close its Green Bay production plant as proof that the taxpaying private sector is struggling, too.

The state budget is facing a \$3.2 billion deficit through 2005 without corrective action.

Lasee said he's growing tired of taking hostile calls from state employees about the contracts.

"They ought to be lucky they've got a job, to tell you the truth," Lasee said. "If they can't understand the situation the state is in, that's their problem. I don't know what their I.Q. is."

Michael Moore, director of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, which represents some state workers suspected of calling in sick in protest, called Gard's and Lasee's opposition unfortunate.

"The money is there for the contracts," Moore said. "And about 80 percent of the people covered by collective bargaining agreements in the state make less than legislators make."

The current legislative salary is \$45,569.

About 35 percent of the first-shift security work force at Wisconsin's 16 adult prisons called in sick Thursday, followed by 20 percent third-shift workers and another 23 percent first-shift workers on Friday, state corrections spokesman William Clausius said.

Clausius declined to specify call-ins at individual prisons.

State Sen. Dave Hansen, D-Green Bay, said unions may be acting out of desperation.

"I think it's inexcusable the committee won't at least vote on the contracts," he said.

Hansen said he believes the contracts were negotiated in good faith and should be approved.

Two days of mass sick calls at the state's prisons may be over, according to a state official.

Department of Employee Relations Secretary Karen Timberlake said she met with Wisconsin State Employee Union executive director Marty Beil, and he agreed to ask local Wisconsin State Employees Union chapters to have their members start showing up for work, she said.

Beil said in a statement the prison guards are not involved in a strike, but Timberlake defines the absences as an illegal strike according to the union's existing contract and state statutes.

She said she expects the guards to return to work.

"Regardless of what you call it, you had a lot of people not reporting to work, and he's asked them to come back," Timberlake said. "Time will tell if local union members go along with that."

Beil did not return several messages The Associated Press left at his office Friday.

The Wisconsin State Employees Union and the

Wisconsin Federation of Teachers filed lawsuits Thursday saying the committee has a legal duty to hold a hearing and approve the contracts because the deals have been ratified. Gard and Lasee are among the co-defendants named.

The Joint Committee on Employment Relations' "unprecedented inaction has left us no choice but to take legal action," teachers union president Bob Beglinger told The Associated Press on Friday. The suit simply asks the committee "to do its duty," he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

