

February 8, 2003 Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Officials spar as guards call in sick for 2nd day

Doyle urges lawmakers to act on contracts, workers to return

By RICHARD P. JONES
rjones@journalssentinel.com

Madison - Upset over inaction on their contracts, prison guards again called in sick Friday, while a labor leader and a Doyle official sparred on whether an illegal strike was under way, and lawmakers kept the pacts on hold.

As many as 254 guards did not report for one shift Friday. The number was not as high as the 416 guards who called in sick Thursday. Still, the absences required other officers to work overtime and supervisors to staff guard posts.

Employment Relations Secretary Karen Timberlake said the events of Thursday were nothing short of a strike, but labor leader Marty Beil said Friday the guards' actions could hardly be called a strike.

"If there had been a strike activity, the consequences would have been far more serious," Beil, executive director of the Wisconsin State Employees' Union, said in a letter to Timberlake.

Gov. Jim Doyle again called on guards to do their jobs and lawmakers to act, up or down, on contract negotiated by the previous administration. He cited overtime costs, which increased from \$72,194 the first day to \$162,971 Friday.

"People should do their job and not pretend to be sick," Doyle said at a news conference in Eau Claire. As for lawmakers, he said that if they approve the contracts, he would find money for the pay raises; if they reject them, he would negotiate new agreements.

But legislative leaders had yet to schedule a committee vote, let alone floor action on 15 labor agreements affecting more than 31,000 state workers.

Assembly Speaker John Gard (R-Peshtigo) said he wanted the Joint Committee on Employment Relations to act next week on the contracts. Senate Majority Leader Mary Panzer (R-West Bend) said she needed more time to analyze costs.

Gard has said the state cannot afford negotiated pay raises, given an immediate \$452 million deficit and anticipated \$3.2 billion deficit over the next two years. While he would reject the contracts, Panzer has not taken a position, other than to question how the state will pay for them.

For much of Friday, sick call absences did not exceed 28%, compared with 35% on Thursday, according to Department of Corrections spokesman Bill Clausius. For the first shift, 23% did not report, 254 of 1,099. For second shift, 28% did not report, or 250 of 889 assigned officers.

The contracts would provide two retroactive raises, 1% effective July 1, 2001, and 2% effective July 1, 2002, plus a 2.5% raise coming in April. Nearly \$80 million has been set aside to cover costs during the current budget cycle.

A number of guards call the media to say their pay was last raised in October 2000 by less than 1%, while lawmakers blocking their contracts just got a 3% raise in pay.

The starting salary of correctional officers is \$11.04 an hour, or \$23,051 a year. Guards with more experience earn \$14.08 an hour, or \$29,399 a year.

At the start of the new session last month, lawmakers received a \$1,336 increase, boosting the annual salary of the part-time job to \$45,569, but some lawmakers say they are not taking the pay increase because of the state deficit, the state employee contract dispute or both.

"I never took mine to start with," Gard said. "I didn't go out an pose for holy pictures like some have. But I just decided that I wasn't taking it. I didn't vote for it, and I didn't take it."

254

Number of guards who did not report for one shift

Friday.

416

Number of guards who called in sick Thursday.