

Veto A Relief For Part-time State Workers

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By Anita Weier The Capital Times

Gov. Jim Doyle's veto of a state budget provision that would have required state employees who work from half- to three-fourths time to pay half of their health insurance premiums is a big relief to about 3,700 workers.

"I object to the significant burden these additional costs would place on part-time employees, more than 80 percent of whom are women, many of whom are working at lower wage scales and in critical job classifications already facing serious shortfalls, such as the health care professions," Doyle wrote in his veto message.

He also vetoed a provision that would have made the part-time workers' contributions to health insurance costs a prohibited subject of collective bargaining and unalterable in future compensation plans for non-represented employees. The measures had been added to the budget by the Republican-controlled Joint Finance Committee.

"This was a bloodthirsty attack by the Republicans on the workers," said Marty Beil, executive director of the Wisconsin State Employees Union.

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Part-timers who work half-time or more now get the same insurance treatment as full-time workers, which varies by county and insurance provider, but covers quite a large portion of the premium. The state now pays the entire health insurance premium cost for about two-thirds of state workers who get health insurance, according to the Department of Employee Trust Funds.

Brad Phillips, 51, a part-time resident care technician at Mendota Mental Health Institute, said the provision would have pretty much ended part-time state employment.

"To lose 45 percent of your salary to health insurance premiums - it is a misnomer to refer to that as a benefit," Phillips said. "That would devastate a lot of people who need to work part-time, balancing child care and work. They wouldn't be able to take care of their children as they would like to."

Republicans have argued consistently that state employee health insurance costs have to be reined in, especially when the state is facing huge budget problems. They note that private sector employees pay hefty amounts for their insurance, if they have it.

Doyle agrees that costs have to be controlled. He has established a three-tier system for non-union workers that will require them to pay premiums ranging from \$25 to \$100 per month for single employees and more for family coverage, effective Jan. 1, 2004. The Department of Employment Relations is negotiating that plan for unionized workers as well.

"I strongly believe that the amount of those contributions should be negotiated at the bargaining table," Doyle wrote. "This principle should apply to part-time employees as firmly as it applies to full-time employees."

Phillips accused the Republicans of “trying to make an end run around the bargaining process. “If they can get away with that, they can get away with anything,” he said. “What does the contract mean then?”

However, a Legislative Fiscal Bureau report says that if contract agreements are not reached for the 2003-05 period by Jan. 1, 2004, the budget provision would go into effect. But Susan Crawford, deputy secretary of the Department of Employment Relations, said that the existing contracts would continue unless either side cancels the extension after a 15- or 30-day notice.

Beil said that because of the way the measure was phrased, Doyle was not able to completely veto it. He was able to use his partial veto authority to remove the part that says it can't be bargained and a provision that said the new premium would be in effect if a contract gets extended during negotiations.

“Our contract has provisions that deal with people who work less than full time,” he said. “If you work less than 50 percent appointment, you pay 50 percent of the premium. So there are little or none of those employees. If you work 50 to 100 percent, you have the formula in the contract.”

Another problem was created for state agencies because they will have to find the money in their budgets to make up for more costly premiums since half of that money was taken out of the budget.

“If there are a significant number of people at a particular university campus who work 50 to 74 percent, the university will have to find a way to pay, because that money is gone. It will be messy for the agencies,” Beil said.

And it can be even messier for the workers, he added.

“At the DNR, where people are actually being laid off, in the first round they were identified for layoff and given options. They can be laid off or retire or work less than 100 percent. A lot of people reduced their time to 60 percent to continue working, prior to this budget amendment,” Beil said.

“So they got a double whack, when they were supposed to pay 50 percent of their premium. People are trying to avoid layoff and make the agencies run. It's not a pretty picture, and it has a huge effect on single parents. They are the folks working less than 75 percent.”

Crawford said part of the language taken out by the governor would have caused the legislators' statutory provision to override the current contracts.

“Any existing contract that discusses state contributions to premiums is still effective. All of the state employee contracts have been extended until they are finalized for 03-05,” she said.

“It is still our goal to have new contracts in place by January 2004. The governor's plan for state employee health insurance is to implement the three-tier proposal by January.”

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