

Gard: ‘major Breakthrough’ Near On 2001-03 State Employee Pacts

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By Matt Pommer The Capital Times

Republican leaders appear ready to approve 2001-03 labor contracts for more than 31,000 unionized state workers.

Fifteen of the contracts had been negotiated by the McCallum administration late last fall. The Doyle administration has reached tentative contracts with two other unions.

Employment Relations Secretary Karen Timberlake said today tentative agreements have been reached with unions representing state attorneys and assistant district attorneys. The terms are within parameters of the other 15 contract settlements, she said.

Republican leaders had raised two objections — the ongoing costs of the contracts in future years and how state employee health insurance is financed. Currently about two-thirds of state workers make no out-of-pocket payments toward their health insurance premiums.

Late Thursday, Assembly Speaker John Gard, R-Peshtigo, said he was “very hopeful that we are on the verge of a major breakthrough with the state employee contracts.” That could come, he said, after the Doyle administration presents its state employee health insurance proposals for the 2003-2005 biennium.

The Group Insurance Board has been working on a reform plan since mid-2002, and Gov. Jim Doyle last week emphasized his support for a plan under which state workers would pay between 5 and 20 percent of the cost of health maintenance organization premiums.

That’s no surprise to Republican leaders. On Feb. 18, Doyle submitted his budget bill calling for adoption of a three-tiered plan for health insurance premium payments by state workers.

Doyle’s proposed change would take effect at the start of 2004. The first impact on premiums would occur on the A payrolls in November.

Gard said the Joint Committee on Employment Relations (JCOER) will meet late in April to review the Doyle administration’s proposals for collective bargaining.

“If the information presented at the JCOER meeting shows that significant health care reforms are a strong possibility, we will consider another JCOER meeting soon afterward to review the 2001-03 agreements.

Gard, mentioned in some circles as a possible gubernatorial candidate in future years, has borne the brunt of state employee criticism for the delay in acting on the labor contracts. Gard sought to soften the criticism in his statement.

“State employees are good people, who work very hard for all of us. They help make Wisconsin the great place it is to live,” he said.

In another development freshman State Sen. Tom Reynolds, R-West Allis, introduced a bill to require state workers to pay 18 percent of their health insurance premiums. He said that was the average for the private sector.