

Governor uses National Guard as strikebreakers

30,000 state workers walk out in Minnesota

Our reporter
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Nearly 30,000 public employees went on strike Monday in Minnesota in a long-running dispute over wages and health benefits. Involving about half the state's workers, the strike is the largest government work stoppage in the state's history and the first since a 22-day strike in 1981.

Governor Jesse Ventura responded to the walkout by ordering 1,000 National Guard members to begin training to man state-run facilities, including veterans homes and treatment centers. In a written statement, Ventura, a former Navy SEAL, suggested the strikers were unpatriotic for walking out as the economy worsened and military action was impending. "Be assured," he said, "we will not let this strike get in the way of doing what is necessary to see our way through these very difficult times."

Workers on the picket lines rejected the efforts to intimidate them. "This is about as American as it gets," said Rhonda Land, an air quality inspector who was among about 25 people picketing Monday outside the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's St. Paul offices. "People being able to speak their minds.... This is extremely patriotic."

The unions had delayed their potential strike two weeks following the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington DC, but under pressure from rank-and-file workers refused to delay it again. Murray Cody, a spokesman for the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees (MAPE), said. "It's unfortunate that it comes to this, but the state refused to bargain with us. Our membership has been very resolved in this."

A spokesman for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 6 said members shouldn't be called unpatriotic for striking during a time of national crisis, nor should they

shoulder the blame for failing to reach a deal. "It takes two sides to cause a strike," said Peter Benner, executive director of the AFSCME Council 6. "We've done this with great reluctance."

Employees involved in the action include highway maintenance workers, tax collectors, janitors, office clerks and parole officers. Of the 28,000 striking workers, about 18,000 belong to AFSCME. Another 10,500 belong to the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees (MAPE).

Governor Ventura said that giving the unions more money would have resulted in service cuts and layoffs. Employee Relations Commissioner Julien Carter said a slowing economy made fiscal prudence essential. Representatives for both unions said they were prepared to go back to the table at any time, but John Wodele, a spokesman for the governor, said the state is also prepared to talk but Ventura "feels that he has put our best offer on the table."

Carter said the state offered AFSCME a 3 percent pay hike in each of the next two years and MAPE a one-time 4 percent increase. AFSCME wanted an annual 5 percent increase while MAPE was asking for about a 4.5 percent increase each year, Carter said.

All along, wages and changes to health benefits took equal footing in the contract discussions. The state hoped to reduce insurance premiums for most by asking people who use the services to take on higher co-payments and deductibles.



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