

Pennsylvania state workers return to work after one-day furlough

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Twenty-five thousand Pennsylvania state workers returned to work on Tuesday, one day after being laid off as a result of a budget impasse between Democratic Governor Ed Rendell and the Republican-controlled State Senate. A tentative budget deal was worked out Monday night, and must be approved by a vote of the full state legislature.

On Sunday night, Governor Rendell ordered the shutting down of all “nonessential” services and placed one third of all state employees on unpaid indefinite furlough. Nearly 24,000 state employees were affected by the crisis, and suffered lost wages of about \$3.5 million.

The hardest hit by furlough was the Department of Transportation, where 11,000 of 12,000 workers were affected. All construction and repair projects on any of the state’s roads and bridges was halted and all driver’s licensing centers were closed.

The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources laid off 2,300 of its 2,600 employees, forcing the closure of all 114 state parks. Tens of thousands of campers and other visitors on summer vacation were forced to leave the parks by midnight Sunday.

The Department of Education laid off 528 of its 740 employees and the Department of Environmental Protection cut 1,349 of its 1,500 workers. All environmental inspections and permits had been stopped.

Some of the other services shut down included all state-run museums and historic sites, the State Library, the cleaning of state office buildings, all public works projects and payments made to all vendors and suppliers.

David Fillman, executive director of Council 13 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, which had 14,000 members laid off, told the Associated Press, “A lot of them live paycheck to paycheck, and even if it’s a day’s pay that they lose, it has an effect on their personal budgets.”

Fillman, however, made no mention of the unions’

strong backing of Rendell, which helped to ensure him a landslide victory in the 2006 elections.

Governor Rendell did not lay off any state police, prison guards or other law enforcement personnel. Health and welfare departments also generally did not get cut. However, assistance for seniors in navigating the complicated Medicare system was halted.

The state’s liquor stores remained opened and a last-minute court order prevented the closing of the casinos that operate within Pennsylvania. However, workers that monitor and maintain the state’s computer system, which ensures that the state collects its share of gambling revenues, were furloughed.

The state has been without a budget since July 1. After not being able to agree on a new budget with the Republican-controlled State Senate, Rendell ordered the shutting down of services despite the state ending the 2006 fiscal year with a \$650 million surplus. The governor proposed a \$27.3 billion spending bill, which the Democrat-controlled House approved. But the Republican-controlled Senate cut \$300 million from the bill, primarily from education and other social services.

The primary differences, however, are not over the cuts. Both sides acknowledged they are very close to a budget and that the differences could be worked out. Rendell has proposed several measures that have yet to be approved by the Republican-controlled Senate. In particular, earlier this year he sought to privatize the state turnpike system in an attempt to raise funds that he promised would be used to pay for the repair of Pennsylvania’s crumbling roads and bridges.

Rendell ordered the shutdown Sunday, saying he would not approve a budget unless the State Senate first approved a number of other proposals, including a surcharge on electricity users to fund alternative energy sources; a mass transportation bill to help fund local mass transit systems; raising the State Department debt ceiling

so the State can borrow more money; the set-up of a fund for investment in bio-technology development; and a statewide ban on smoking in public places.

Senate Republican leaders said that these measure had nothing to do with a budget and refused to discuss them. Meanwhile on Monday, House Republicans proposed that the House pass the Senate version of the budget, but House Democratic leaders used procedural measures to prevent a vote and effectively closed down the House chamber until a deal is reached with the Senate.

Late Monday night, Rendell and House Democratic leaders announced that they have reached a deal with Republicans to allow workers to return to their jobs on Tuesday. Under the deal, Rendell withdrew his proposal for the electricity surcharge and the bio-technology research fund, both of which will now be taken up in the fall. The Senate agreed to an additional \$300 million as a one-time measure to help pay for pre-schools, all-day kindergartens and to provide laptops in high school classrooms. The Senate also agreed to funding for mass transit.

While on the surface the dispute appears to be a battle between Democrats and Republicans in the state government, underlying it is the fact that the state is facing a severe financial crisis caused by the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the downturn in the economy. To finance the military, Congress and the Bush administration have been cutting federal funds for transportation, education and healthcare and are pushing more and more of the costs onto the states.

With Democrats now controlling both houses of the US Congress, Rendell can no longer blame federal cuts on the Republicans. While he has provoked this confrontation with the state legislature, it is the state workers and the people who rely upon government services who are paying the price.



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