

Pennsylvania state workers speak out on payless paydays

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Pennsylvania state employees, 33,000 of them, received a payless payday last Friday as state lawmakers and Governor Ed Rendell have been unable to reach agreement on a budget that is more than a month past due.

On July 27, Rendell promised to pass an interim budget so state workers would be paid, but he never presented one. Now the governor is saying that an interim budget, which will include 300 layoffs, will be presented on Monday, August 3. It is not clear, however, if it will pass. Many lawmakers have said that passing an interim budget would “take the pressure off” passing the budget. Even if the interim budget does pass, state Treasurer Rob McCord said that workers would still not see their back pay until mid-August.

Some 77,000 state employees have been working without pay since June 30, when the 2008-2009 fiscal year ended. State employees are paid every two weeks, with about half being paid each week. Next Friday, the other 44,000 state employees face a payless payday.

Pennsylvania is one of three US states without a budget. A drastic decline in tax revenues as a result of the current economic crisis has left the state with a multibillion-dollar deficit. Democratic Governor Ed Rendell along with Democrats in the state legislature are seeking a budget that includes service cuts, 800 layoffs and tax increases. Republicans, who hold a majority in the state senate, are opposed to any tax increase and are instead demanding even deeper budget cuts and more layoffs.

State workers rallied outside the state capital last Tuesday to protest the lack of progress on a budget. Smaller rallies were held outside state office buildings in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

Workers in Pittsburgh spoke to the *World Socialist*

Web Site about the payless paydays and the impact on their lives.

Runa Lester, also an income maintenance caseworker, has 15 years of service. “We have already received word that the money is going quickly,” she said. “Everyone is having a hard time. If we don’t get paid on Friday, I don’t know what I will do. I have called all my creditors, and the only one who cares is the light company. All the other ones are like, ‘whatever.’ I am a single mother and things are tight without a paycheck.

“As state employees we are applying the standard of good customer service for the state’s most vulnerable citizens. At some point we will touch somebody in your life. It may be with health care, long-term care, or mental health issues, trying to keep people in their homes—in some way we will touch someone in your life. Yet we are being treated like we don’t matter.”

Gina Young, a caseworker with five years’ service, said, “I last got paid the Friday before last. I got 70 percent of my pay. This Friday I will get nothing unless something is worked out. I am not very happy. I have two kids, 20 and 9. I have to feed them. Giant Eagle doesn’t take IOUs and neither does the Port Authority. I am borrowing money just to afford to come to work.

“If you have picture perfect credit you can get a loan, but otherwise you can’t. Our credit union says they have the money to loan us this payday, but after that they are out of funds. You have 60 days to pay them back, but after that it turns into a 9 percent interest.

“My son is in day camp while I come to work. I can’t pay for it. I have no other alternative for child care.”

Ken Ward, a clerical worker with four years of service, said, “I just got a shutoff notice for the water. How do they expect us to pay when we are not getting paid? I have three kids that I have to feed. They are 3, 4

and 18 years. I am borrowing from my parents and friends just to buy food. My parents are retired and on a fixed income; they don't have a lot of money to help me.

“What has happened to all the tax money the state is collecting from the lottery and casinos? Why couldn't they pay us with that money while they are working out the budget?

“Rendell had no problem getting the casino bill passed, it shouldn't be such a problem to pass a budget. They have all year to work on it. The people that work for the casinos, the lottery and the liquor control board are all getting paid. That is because the state is making money from them. We are helping the public, and he feels that we don't deserve to be paid.

“I have struggled all my life; all I want is a job where I can retire after 35 years with a little and some health care. Now look, this system is messed up.”



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