

Paterson Raises the Prospect of Furloughs

By *NICHOLAS CONFESSORE*



ALBANY — Gov. David A. Paterson said on Tuesday that he would seek legislative approval to begin furloughing state workers one day per week, saying that the refusal by their unions to reopen their contracts or accept other concessions on pay and benefits amid New York’s fiscal crisis left him little choice.

Administration officials also said Mr. Paterson would consider including the furlough language in an emergency budget bill, setting up a major showdown with the Legislature and their union allies: Because such emergency bills are extremely difficult to amend, lawmakers would face the choice of consenting to furloughs or allowing the government to shut down.

“In the budget proposal that I have, it calls for \$250 million in workforce reductions. I have been unable to secure any agreement from any of the public unions as to how to come up with this \$250 million,” Mr. Paterson said at a news conference in the Capitol.

Mr. Paterson, in what appears to be an effort to shake up a nearly month-long stalemate over the state budget, also called for the Legislature to make an up or down vote on his budget proposal on Wednesday and failing that, come to work every weekday until an agreement can be reached.

He also submitted legislation to close what he said was an additional \$620 million budget gap that has opened up over the weeks the Legislature has spent debating how to close the existing gap of more than \$9 billion. The budget was due March 31.

The new bill would impose roughly \$224 million in additional spending cuts, including the elimination of one of Mr. Paterson’s own signature initiatives — a \$25 million seed fund for new technologies — as well as cuts to legislative earmarks and tobacco prevention programs, and delaying plans to repair the roof of the State Capitol.

“Budgeting is a process that involves discipline and sacrifice. Almost all New Yorkers, I assume, have had to be disciplined and sacrifice during this period,” Mr. Paterson said. “I am hoping that the Legislature and the Executive will derive a great deal of resolve from watching our fellow New Yorkers grapple with this process.”

The showdown over furloughs — which would affect about 100,000 state workers — does not appear to be imminent, however, as Mr. Paterson appears ready to submit the legislation to a regular legislative process first.

Using the emergency bill as a vehicle for the furloughs was “something we’re contemplating,” said Robert L. Megna, the state budget director. “As of tomorrow, we’re going to put it up as a separate bill.”

Danny Donohue, president of the Civil Service Employees Association, issued a one-word statement in response to Mr. Paterson’s announcement: “Nuts.”

Mr. Paterson also suggested that if lawmakers — who typically work two to four days a week during the six-month legislative session — would not come to work on their own, he might use his powers to call an extraordinary session of the Legislature to compel them to remain in session.

It is not clear, however, whether he would be able to do so. Since Mr. Paterson last used that power, leaders of both houses have used a parliamentary maneuver to keep the Legislature technically in extraordinary session at all times, concurrent with the normal regular session. That might prevent Mr. Paterson from calling a new extraordinary session.

In a statement, Austin Shafran, a spokesman for Senate Democrats, did not say whether the Senate would agree to take up Mr. Paterson’s proposal, promising only that “we will continue to work with the Executive and Assembly to pass a fair and bipartisan budget that controls spending provides tax relief, and protects jobs and vital services.”

Mr. Shafran added, “We think there are substantial legal issues with reducing hours for workers who are under a collectively bargained contract.”

Speaking to reporters outside his office, Sheldon Silver, the Assembly speaker, asserted that the governor had the right to manage the size of the state workforce and that “he doesn’t need the Legislature to authorize anything.”

Mr. Silver also appeared irked at the suggestion that lawmakers had failed to agree to a budget because they were not working hard enough.

“Our members work, in many instances, seven days a week. They are here, they’re in their districts, they’re on the telephone,” Mr. Silver said, adding, “If we’re sitting here and not being able to move and make progress, there are other obligations that members take very seriously in dealing with their constituents.”