Union employees upset by Gov.-elect Walker’s proposal

By Leader-Telegram staff
and Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Gov.-elect Scott Walker's proposal to essentially abolish state employee unions doesn't sit well with officials representing Chippewa Valley union employees.

Walker raised that possibility Tuesday as one option to control rising employee wage and benefits costs and eliminate the state's budget deficit.

As a short-term fix, Walker wants workers to make a 5 percent contribution to their retirement pensions. State union workers traditionally have not contributed to their plans. He also wants to increase employees' share of health costs to 12 percent - up from 4 to 6 percent, depending on the bargaining unit. Those changes would save $154 million from January to June 30 alone.

Those notions drew the ire of union officials and employees here and elsewhere in Wisconsin.

"UW faculty salaries are already significantly below those of our peer institutions," said Thomas Kemp, associate professor of economics at UW-Eau Claire and a candidate to be president of an employee union formed at the university earlier this year.

"Further cuts to the benefits package would impact UW-EC's ability to recruit and retain employees. Over time this would reduce the quality of a UW education," Kemp said.

Ron "Duff" Martin, president of the Eau Claire Association of Educators, which represents Eau Claire school district teachers, said he hopes the current Legislature recognizes the state's storied labor history, particularly in the area of collective bargaining rights.

"I believe the collective bargaining laws work in Wisconsin," he said. "It allows for local elected leaders - school boards, city councils and county boards - to negotiate fair contracts with employee groups."

Walker, a Republican, said he's looking at a range of options that would weaken unions, including eliminating their ability to negotiate with the state.
"Anything from the decertify all the way through modifications of the current laws in place," Walker said in reference to possible changes regarding union workers at a luncheon sponsored by the Milwaukee Press Club at the Newsroom Pub. "The bottom line is that we are going to look at every legal means we have to try to put that balance more on the side of taxpayers and the people who care about services."

Todd Burns is a development officer in the Office of University Advancement at UW-Stout. Although not unionized under collective bargaining legislation, Burns said academic staff at the school already has endured unpaid furlough days, promised pay increases that were rescinded and increased health care costs.

"I think it is very important for the Governor-elect and all our elected officials to understand the tremendous financial burden the academic staff of the University of Wisconsin-Stout and the rest of the UW System institutions are already feeling during these tough economic times," he said.

Walker's comments were an escalation of an aggressive posture he's taken with state unions as he prepares to take office on Jan. 3. Union leaders said Walker and the incoming GOP-controlled Legislature will face a fight if they seek to rewrite a 1971 state law governing state employee unions.

Walker said the state's red ink and his pledge to focus on economic recovery require cuts in workers' health and pension benefits. Private-sector unions in Wisconsin are governed by federal law, but state and municipal employee unions are governed by state law.

To strip unions of their rights and authority, Walker and the Legislature would have to rewrite the State Employment Labor Relations Act, said Peter Davis, general counsel at the Wisconsin Employment Relations Commission. The commission handles disputes between state and local unions and the agencies that employ them.

"The right to bargain .. exists because that's the choice the Legislature made in the past, and they could make a different choice in the future," Davis said.

Davis said lawmakers and Walker could keep a prohibition against state employee strikes while they make changes to the law. But that doesn't mean unions might not try to strike.

Also, state officials probably could not abolish state employee unions.

"They can continue to exist," Davis said. "The question would be, 'Does (Walker) have to deal with them as a matter of law?" A more likely scenario, Davis said, is for Walker and legislators to take
subjects like health insurance and pensions off the table for collective bargaining. The state already has a long list of subjects that can't be bargained with unions, including the policies and goals of state agencies.

"There is no question that the state is in a difficult budget situation," Kemp said. "That said, I feel confident that governor-elect Walker will understand that cuts to education are the last thing that Wisconsin needs. Cutting education would reduce the workforce competitiveness of our citizens at a time when labor markets are tight."