

Chicago Tribune

www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-ap-mi-detroitunions-ral,0,2007739.story

Unions ramp up protests against city, schools

By COREY WILLIAMS

Associated Press Writer

6:22 PM CDT, September 23, 2009

DETROIT

City workers and the mayor's office are approaching a weekend deadline on possible cuts to hundreds of jobs if unions don't agree to wage cuts and other concessions aimed at saving cash-starved Detroit from further fiscal misery.

The 7,700-member Detroit Federation of Teachers also is negotiating a new contract with the city's troubled public school district, which is looking for ways to save money.

Their respective battles come as Mayor Dave Bing tries to wipe out a \$300 million deficit and schools' emergency financial manager Robert Bobb restructures the district while working to fill a \$259 million budget hole.

About 85 city and school district employees gathered outside City Hall on Wednesday afternoon, many with signs bearing messages such as, "Lay off Dave Bing," "We demand a decent contract" and "Save Detroit."

Larry Carson, 53, a 15-year veteran of the city's water department, held a sign that read, "Keep City Jobs!" Carson said he's most concerned about jobs being privatized and workers not being replaced after they leave or retire.

"Go to any plant in the water department. We are understaffed," Carson said. "If you keep this up, somebody's going to get hurt."

"The budget situation is unusually bad right now, and not losing ground may be hard," Albion College professor and University of Michigan labor researcher Greg Saltzman said.

"Unions are going to fight much harder to keep things they already have than to get new things they never had before."

Bing was elected in a May 5 runoff and already has laid off about 300 workers. He has said

another 1,000 could lose their jobs Saturday unless bargaining units agree to 10 percent wage cuts in unpaid furlough days and other contract concessions.

Detroit has about 13,000 employees.

Ten labor unions have endorsed his opponent, Tom Barrow, in the upcoming Nov. 3 general election. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, which represents 90,000 workers throughout Michigan, shifted its support from Bing to Barrow. AFSCME Local 207 in Detroit has been a prime mover behind the anti-Bing demonstrations.

"We confronted them in negotiations that if the unions take the concessions will the layoffs go away, and they said 'no,'" said John Riehl, president of the 1,000-member local.

"We want to let the public know about the cutbacks and damage to the city, and how angry and upset we are with this mayor."

Several smaller groups among the city's 50 bargaining units already have agreed to concessions, mayoral spokesman Ed Cardenas said.

"We can always pull back the number of layoffs going into effect," he said.

Just over 1,000 Detroit teachers and staff have been laid off since Bobb was appointed in March by Gov. Jennifer Granholm to clean up the district's finances.

About 590 have been called back to work. Another 400 have retired.

Contract negotiations are moving along, but "folks are definitely pushing back," teachers' union President Keith Johnson said.

"They're also being asked to work longer days and a longer school year, yet be paid less. That's not going to happen," he said. "People still have to provide for their families. Those who make the least are asked to give the most."

Associated Press Writer Jeff Karoub in Detroit contributed to this report.