

Chief Executive Officer's Message

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It always seems to be the case that when you have everything settled and a course has been set, the winds shift and new direction must be found in the world of labor relations. This not only is upsetting to negotiators, but leaves the general membership with a sense of bewilderment and frustration. Thus is the potential possibility with the recent court decision involving the Governor and his method of balancing the budget utilizing his unallotment powers.

In case you missed it, last summer the Governor after being unable to reach a budget agreement with the DFL controlled legislature unilaterally balanced the State budget using what is known as unallotment. The Governor made cuts of 2.7 billion dollars much to the joy of conservatives and cry's he overstepped his constitutional authority by liberals. Regardless of which side of the aisle you were on this ended last year's session and both parties are gearing up for 2010. But, this was only the beginning. Several groups threatened legal action and in December, 2009 a Ramsey County District Court judge ruled the Governor did indeed overstep his authority and restored a minute portion of funding to a nutrition program.

This judicial action has the potential to reverse the entire 2.7 billion in cuts. If this occurs the legislature and Governor will be forced to revisit all of last year's cuts. This combined with the current 1.2 billion dollar deficit does not bode well for cities and counties. Although the cuts in State aid to local governments were not as drastic as many feared, any additional cuts will be devastating for future negotiations. The Governor has appealed the decision and hopes to bypass the Court of Appeals and go directly to the State Supreme Court.

What does this mean for our Locals? Right now, it is all up in the air. We obviously need to wait and see what transpires in the court system. But, this doesn't mean you should stand by and do nothing. As I have stated many times the opportunity for change and the potential benefits to which it may lead are all too real. We are all fully aware Employers are asking for reductions and/or freezes in salaries and benefits. With these attempts come opportunities to add or strengthen various forms of language in your collective bargaining agreements. Whether it is seniority, shift bidding, or assignments, these are all areas in which you can seek change.

More than one plan of action and list of issues may be needed to keep the process flowing smoothly. You cannot get caught in a situation with no room to maneuver. Having a negotiation contingency plan in the event your employer comes to the table seeking reductions in pay and benefits is paramount. With these difficult economic times the willingness to be flexible may bode well for your local in the long run. Many Unions across the spectrum are having to freeze wages and halt increases to benefits. But looking outside the box and seek change in other facets of your collective bargaining agreement will prove beneficial for years' to come.

As always, contact me at the LELS office or at dwells@lels.org.