

Pierce Pages



A newsletter from IFPTE Local 17, AFL-CIO - May 2009

What's up with Furloughs in Pierce County? Q & A

By Local 17 Union Representative
Rene Jankiewicz

Here is the latest on furloughs in Pierce County from a factual and philosophical perspective using a question and answer format (Q&A). We'll go from establishing what a furlough is, to specifically, if, where, and how Local 17 members are affected by a furlough.

What is a furlough?

A furlough is a day that employees do not work, and aren't compensated. They are pay cuts. The name furlough is a military term used when officers were sent home for periods of rest, which, for them, was a good thing. The officers were "on furlough." Co-opting this word by employers to use in lieu of coming right out and saying "pay cut" was no accident. It sounds a lot less like a pay cut and just like... take a day off.

Does Local 17 have an across the board policy in favor of or actively against furloughs?

No. This really has to be handled on a case-by-case basis. We believe that furloughs make sense, if it makes a difference in saving jobs and employees are rewarded (ideally) and made whole in subsequent years; and when there is a clear cut understanding that the furlough is temporary.

Contract Update:

Week of April 27 Status: The Contract is in the Executive's Office. After calling the Council and discovering that it hadn't arrived there yet, I (Local 17 Union Representative Rene Jankiewicz) personally called to ensure that it had made it to the Executive's Office. I was told that she would have it processed and sent to Council by the end of the week.

Once it gets to the Council it will take three to four weeks for ratification. So, we should be looking at the week of May 25 for Council ratification. Keep your fingers crossed! Following ratification, increases would appear on paychecks.

Has the County made a proposal to furlough Local 17 members?

Local 17 and the County met over the budget crisis many times. The County presented information to us (Local 17 and Local 120) about options. For example, based on a \$264,000 need, (this number was subject to change based on Council decisions that were taking place throughout this process) and this is after all previously eliminated, or transferred positions and subsequent savings through attrition has already been taken into consideration; if all employees took nine furlough days there may be no need for layoffs at this time.

However, the Council was apparently asking where the "busiest" employees were, which Chuck Kleeberg indicated happened to be Planners, a non-represented group of employees. So, if the unions only took the furlough days (and non-represented did not have any furlough days), no matter what, there would be layoffs. The opinion in this case shared by Labor and Management, was that if the union members were the only employees to take the furlough, it would create several

problems. Obviously, morale would be impacted in a huge way and resentment would reach an all time high. In terms of practical matters, the employees in many sections work together and it would not be useful for the Planners to have the Engineers and Biologists that they work with be gone, as they need to work and coordinate together.

Local 17 made an information request and followed up by discussing what other cost saving measures PALS had investigated and implemented prior to even considering a furlough or layoff. Local 17 explained to the County that before furloughs would ever be agreed to or even considered, members would want to see that every other option and expense had been eliminated first. Additionally, even if we were strictly talking about layoffs and not furloughs, we would exercise the same concerns. Members would hope the County was eliminating any flexible budget line

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items before someone had to lose his or her job.

How would the County reward employees' sacrifice if furloughs were approved?

After several meetings, in which Troy Lee, Chris Estep and myself attended, the County had still made no formal proposal on furloughs. We asked the County if it intended to make a proposal and how it would make employees whole. What could the County offer in recognition of the sacrifice employees would be making? Would there be a reinstatement of the days in subsequent years or any other form of compensable recognition?

The County said "no."

The budget was looking too dismal and unknown for the next year, so they weren't willing to make any offer associated with the furlough. Additionally, throughout these talks, the Council numbers kept getting higher, and Chuck Kleeberg let us know that things were likely going to get worse when the next set of numbers comes in a few months from now and possibly again in 2010.

The Bottom Line

In summary, during our continuing dialogue with PALS and HR, PALS and Public Works were able to reach an Agreement for the same number of Local 17 positions/classifications that would have been slated for layoff to be transferred to Public Works.

We then negotiated an Agreement in recognition that although these people were not laid off, the circumstances generating all of this, even those going "voluntarily" were generated by less than normal circumstances. The County agreed to waive the probationary period and to

allow these employees recall rights for 24 months if positions are restored during that period in PALS.

So, at this moment, Local 17 had no one laid off and the County did not make a furlough proposal. I am referring to it as the "Passover Miracle."

It may be short-lived. However, as we know that the numbers are likely to get worse. For Public Works, I can't help but worry that the County is robbing Peter to help Paul only to find out the whole family is broke.

Are there furloughs taking place in the County now?

Yes. Local 120 voted to approve taking 9 furlough days to eliminate several positions from being laid off. As I understand it, despite the 9 furlough days they were still going to lose 2 members. When Local 120 voted to approve the furlough, Chuck Kleeberg implemented 9 furlough days for non-represented employees as well.

If the County makes a furlough proposal in PALS will all of the members get to vote on it?

There is more than one way to do this depending on how the proposal was made. If it said PALS specifically on it, it would be different than if the County made the proposal potentially for later use by any Department that was interested in it. In either case, we would have to get clarification on the intent; and a clear proposal.

If the County made a County-wide proposal, there is no question, everyone would vote. If the County made a PALS proposal, and everyone voted, and then made a Public Works proposal and the same voting pool voted again we could end up with different outcomes made by the same members. That would not make sense. If the County makes separate proposals the outcome should be influenced by

the groups they represent.

We need to wait and see how any proposal would be written and go from there. The way a proposal is written influences our decisions. The membership will need to get together to discuss the proposal and be part of the solution.

"These economic times are uncharted waters for many of us. We value our jobs and serve the public with professionalism and excellence.

Unfortunately, it's obvious that "furlough days" which is a type of pay cut may be on the table in the near future for us.

As union members, we need to keep our minds open for possible solutions and recognize that even though we may work in different departments, we are all still one Local. If required of us, we will have the debate and maybe we can arrive at a better solution where all the membership can be part of the solution."

**- Troy Lee,
Chapter President**