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Wisconsin State Workers Fret, as G.O.P. Takes Over

By MONICA DAVEY

MADISON, Wis. — In preparation for Monday's inauguration of the new governor, Scott Walker, red, white and blue bunting has been draped around the Capitol's echoing rotunda. Lawmakers are unpacking files in their newly assigned offices. And state workers are fretting.

"What does this bring? What does it mean? Where are we going here?" Marty Beil, the leader of a [union](#) that represents 22,000 of Wisconsin's corrections officers, maintenance workers, game wardens and others, said the other day. "State employees feel like they are the target of all the slings and the arrows and the bullets that the new administration is already throwing."

There is a reason this place has, at moments lately, looked like a parade of boxes — arriving, departing and shuttling to better (and lesser) offices. The amount of change here is huge: the fall election turned control of the State Assembly, the State Senate and the governor's office from the Democrats to the Republicans. But even before soon-to-be-Governor Walker and other Republican leaders officially take over next week, the fight over public workers nearly boiled over.

December, often a sleepy time around here, brought a series of explosive episodes. Democratic leaders, pressing to approve contracts for state workers before Republicans took control, called a special

session.

Mr. Walker, who has said publicly that he hopes to force public employees' wages and benefits "into line" with everyone else's, urged leaders against the session, saying he needed "maximum flexibility" to handle the state's coming budgets, but Democrats argued that the contracts were not particularly beneficial to workers anyway (they included no raises and furlough time that amounted to a pay cut).

In the end, the State Assembly approved most of the contracts by a single vote, one that was cast, Republicans complain bitterly, by a legislator who had been permitted to travel to Madison to vote though he was serving a jail sentence (with work-release privileges) for driving under the influence of an intoxicant. But a tie in the State Senate — thanks, in part, shockingly to a "no" vote from the Democrats' own majority leader — meant the contracts failed. (The leader, Russ Decker of Schofield, who had already lost his re-election bid, was then deposed by his caucus.)

Once Mr. Walker is sworn in, brand-new negotiations are presumed for state employee contracts. Union leaders are gloomy — or worse. They complain that Mr. Walker has, so far, ignored their efforts to reach out to him. A union leader, Bryan Kennedy, suggested that Mr. Walker was aiming to change the state's long-held motto, "Forward," to "Always the Low Price."

Lawmakers in both parties predict a range of possibilities for state workers will now be on the table: salary cuts, higher health care contributions, and new restrictions and employee contributions for pensions. For his part, Mr. Walker's office issued a statement saying: "He believes that state workers are great people who do great work, but he understands that to get through these tough budget times there will need to be shared sacrifice, which is why on his first day on the job he will begin making a 5 percent pension contribution voluntarily."

Robin Vos, a Republican leader in the Assembly, was less diplomatic, bemoaning a rise in Wisconsin's spending in recent years and a predicted \$3.3 billion deficit in the coming budget. "Compare benefits at any large corporation with any government worker, and it's not even close," he said. "It's not just Wisconsin. Look around."

To Mr. Vos, some cuts — particularly given what he described as the security of a state job, the vacation time, the sick time, the health benefits and the pension benefits — are inevitable. “In today’s environment, I think most people would gladly trade earning a little less with having a guaranteed job,” he said. “I sometimes think they don’t get the way other people are living.”

State workers here are predicting a flood of retirements by those who will not want to bear the uncertainty of it all, and particularly the prospect of shrinking pension benefits. Some employees were already talking about moving elsewhere, getting new jobs, retiring.



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