

Some Rensselaer County employees say they feel 'betrayed' by UPSEU

By Katie Nowak – Troy Record

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TROY -- If one worker's frustration is any indication, the United Public Service Employee's Union may no longer serve Rensselaer County employees next year.

Sally Degnen, a social welfare examiner for Rensselaer County Department of Social Services said that she and many of her fellow union members **felt that UPSEU had abandoned them** in the days since County Executive Kathy Jimino announced 27 county employees would be laid off effective Dec. 31, many of them UPSEU members.

The layoffs came in the wake of union members voting down a proposal that would have saved the county \$2.2 million in personnel costs. That proposal would have switched employees' insurance plans from Blue Choice to the New York State Health Insurance Plan, which Jimino said provided comparable coverage at a savings to the county and union members.

At a vote earlier this month where less than half of eligible union voters turned out, that proposal was defeated by a margin of nine votes.

Degnen said that after the vote, a UPSEU union rep met with principal examiners in each DSS unit, informing them that there would be layoffs, with pink slips coming that Friday, Dec. 10.

"Everybody was in a state of shock," Degnen recalled.

Employees called the union office in Albany, she said, only to be met with an abrupt request for names and numbers and a promise for callbacks. The following day, Dec. 9, when **no one heard back from the union**, they started calling again. This time, there was only a recording, **saying the office was closed. The same message was played at the union headquarters in Long Island, Degnen said, and continued throughout the following day.**

Despite the lack of communication, Degnen said one of her fellow employees was able to get through to **union president Kevin Boyle, who assured them that there would be no layoffs that Friday.**

They came anyway.

In the midst of all the confusion, Degnen said, she and a number of other union members **felt betrayed by the union's lack of action.**

"I think we've been very respectful of both sides," she said. "I think we've handled it very professionally when we could have been very aggressive about it. Some people would like to

have picket signs, petitions. But we've tried to be a unified front and find out what's going on and how we can help ourselves. **And we're met with answering machines for two days.** How's that to deal with the situation?"

It was only the following week, during the Dec. 14 legislature meeting, that Boyle publicly spoke out against the layoffs, a gesture Degnen called "**a day late and a dollar short.**"

Degnen herself had planned to speak at the meeting and vocalize many of her frustrations, but Boyle spoke before her, she said, and some of her coworkers suggested she didn't.

"I regret that now," she said. "**He wasn't speaking for me. He wasn't speaking for any of us that night.**"

"I'm sorry I didn't get up to speak, I was trying not to make things worse for us, but I have to say something," she continued. "I've never been the type of person to sit idly by and let things happen. ... It's heartbreaking to see people laid off when there's no good reason for it, when there's other alternatives, other cuts that could be made to save these people's jobs."

Boyle said the union has "been on top of this (situation) from day one," and has been working diligently with the county on the members' behalf since the layoffs were announced in order to seek feasible alternatives. He chalked up Degnen's anger to unhappiness with the outcome of the health care switch vote, but said he understands her frustrations, and the frustrations of all of UPSEU's membership.

"We wish the county executive would have been more forthright and certainly more responsive to the concerns of her employees, but she chose not to be. From our perspective, we've done everything that we at this particular point can do," Boyle said. "We have 1,200 people we represent in the county, I'm confident there will be some that will criticize one or two aspects of something. We respect that. We'll continue to provide our members with information to keep them informed of what's taking place, and keeping lines of communications open with our membership."

As for those lines of communication, specifically the union headquarters phone lines that were closed on Dec. 9 and 10, Boyle chalked that up to an **unforeseeable scheduling conflict**. Staff meetings and training, set up months ago, took place those days, he said, and a **glitch in the phone answering service** led to the indication that no one was in the office. That problem has since been fixed, he said.

The union has been making overtures to the county, Boyle said, and is planning to present formal proposals in the near future that include a retirement incentive program, voluntary layoffs and a no-layoff guarantee that would protect employees from another round of layoffs in 2011. He's

hoping Jimino will grant a 30-day stay of the layoffs while he works with her to save the positions currently on the chopping block.

But Jimino said Boyle's proposals are unrealistic, and do nothing to protect taxpayers from shouldering an additional burden. A "no layoff" clause would take away her ability to manage any future budget concerns, she added, and could even lead to more layoffs if savings need to be made in a short period of time.

Boyle's claim that Jimino was unresponsive to the needs of county employees is untrue, she said, with the county and the union working together since September to work on a savings plan, negotiations outlined in her Oct. 15 budget address. She issued a verbal memorandum of agreement with the union about the health care plan switch on Nov. 17, she said, **which was signed off on by the union on Nov. 22**, and the county on Nov. 29.

"We were pretty clear that if the county could not reach an agreement with the union in regards to health insurance that we would have to make up those savings by reducing another estimated 39 positions," she said.

Though Jimino said she is always open to money-saving ideas, UPSEU's proposals so far have been too little, too late.

"At this point, I don't see any change in what's happening," she said.

For Degan, **who pays an average of \$500 per year in union dues, the perceived lack of answers from UPSEU and the lack of action of its leaders don't seem to be worth the price tag.**

"People have been very unhappy with this union for a number of years, and this is like the final straw, how they've handled this," she said. "There's a lot of people saying they want a different union. Where are they when we need them the most?"

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