

SNG-Looming public union strike-5-25-15

The looming public unions strike in Illinois

By Jim Nowlan

From my distant vantage point, I foresee as inevitable a first-ever strike in July by state of Illinois public employee unions.

There is just no way to bridge a chasm wide as the Grand canyon between feisty GOP governor Bruce Rauner, who is probably spoiling for a strike, and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which is the lead union in negotiations with the state that are on-going to replace a contract that expires July 1.

I think Rauner wants to make a national name for himself as the governor who toppled the unions from their comfortable perches. He cannot do so in the union-friendly Democratic legislature so he will seek to break the backs of the unions via the collective bargaining process.

If successful, he would indeed become a national political figure.

Rauner has already gone to the federal court for a judgment in support of his efforts to stop public employee unions from exacting dues from workers who don't join the unions.

The governor's role model in all this is undoubtedly President Ronald Reagan, who in 1981 momentarily faced down the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) by replacing controllers who had struck illegally.

Reagan's action subsequently hobbled unions across both the public and private sectors. They haven't been the same since.

In Illinois, public employee unions, who represent about 95 percent of the state's 62,000 employees, have grown fat and sassy under sweetheart contracts negotiated over the past decade with Democratic governors who craved their votes and dollars.

During this period, pay for unionized workers went up more than 50 percent while that for non-union supervisory employees actually went down as a result of pay freezes combined with required unpaid furlough days.

No wonder that thousands of supervisory employees migrated to union membership so they could earn as much as those they supervised.

The unions have also used contract rules to tie state agency executives in knots. For example, agency executives find it almost impossible to recruit talent from outside union ranks.

Union rules allow state employees to claim any open position on the basis of seniority. If the claimant is not qualified for the position, the state will provide training assistance for the employee.

One non-union manager I know tried to promote a deserving employee to a better job—but because of required union postings of job openings and seniority, the wrong person got the job. This is not unusual.

Rauner is itching to take back control, humble the unions and make a name for himself. How will he do it?

I am guessing that in negotiations Rauner's people will seek cuts in pay, the right to privatize state work, elimination of seniority, increased health care premiums, and prohibitions on union membership for management employees.

All of this is, of course, is the equivalent of waving bright red capes in front of the bulls.

Gov. Jim Thompson signed a collective bargaining law for state employees in 1983, which allows all but “essential” employees such as prison guards to strike. There has never been a major strike against the state of Illinois.

I talked with old friend Michael LeRoy, a professor of labor relations at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign and author of a book about collective bargaining.

“Union leaders usually counsel their members against strikes,” says LeRoy, “but there is often enormous pressure from the rank-and-file members to go out (on strike).”

LeRoy sees AFSCME and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), another major state of Illinois union, as “hard bargainers” in behalf of their members.

Though not an expert on labor negotiations, I predict the governor’s final contract offer this summer will be unacceptable, even insulting, to AFSCME.

This will set the stage for an “impasse” (in which further bargaining would be futile), a legal term in collective bargaining, along with that of “good faith bargaining.” These terms of art typically end up being interpreted by the courts as applied to conflict situations such as this will certainly be.

Rauner will then seek to implement his final offer, and in response AFSCME will go out on strike.

This will mean war, and as such it will be bitter. Hold onto your hats.