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## A face-off at Capitol

As Paterson girds for battle with Senate GOP on budget cuts, unions, other groups arrive to protect their financial interests

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ALBANY — It's a perennial sight at the state Capitol: busloads of protesters imploring lawmakers not to cut the budget. But usually they come later in an entirely different season, especially as the April 1 budget deadline approaches.

That will change today, as at least 1,000 people from public employee unions and myriad human service agencies descend on downtown Albany to make their voices heard during the special session that Gov. David Paterson has called as part of his effort to cut \$2 billion from the budget.

But was this trip really necessary?

As of Monday evening, it seemed likely today's session will result in very little progress. In a 9 p.m. press conference from the Red Room, Paterson announced that he would meet with legislative leaders at 12:30 p.m. today to discuss the immediate future of his proposed cuts.

Earlier in the evening, Senate Republicans had said the chamber would vote on Paterson's proposals, designed to close an expected \$1.5 billion gap brought on by the collapse of Wall Street, but they are almost certain to turn it down.

"I will vote no," said Senate Republican Majority Leader Dean Skelos, who said he believed the plan would result in higher local property taxes and cause harmful cuts to schools among other problems.

In his subsequent press conference, Paterson called Skelos' approach "political," and said he would not submit his proposals unless there was a three-way agreement.

Assembly Democrats plan to hold a caucus this morning and then decide how to vote on the measure, said Assemblyman Jack McEneny, D-Albany.

Throughout the day on Monday, Paterson had turned up his rhetoric against the recalcitrant lawmakers, taking special aim at GOP senators, who lost their majority during the Nov. 4 elections.

"There has been no negotiation," Paterson said in a Monday morning conference call with reporters. "In other words, there has been no attempt to change our figures."

Paterson said his staff has briefed lawmakers some 50 times on the proposed cuts, despite complaints by Skelos that the governor hasn't sent the Legislature the actual bills detailing the budget trims.

Paterson contends that the draft bills provide all the information that lawmakers need; moreover, the fact that they remain drafts is meant to facilitate the process by allowing legislators to comment or suggest changes. The governor characterized Skelos' complaints as "a total farce."

Skelos, though, said there can be substantial changes between drafts and final bills.

Still, Paterson kept up the pressure, suggesting that public opinion would be squarely against lawmakers if they don't make cuts. "The people of New York have no sympathy for the Legislature," he said.

Those remarks came hours after a new poll from the Siena Research Institute showed the governor remains popular, and that 75 percent of voters agree the state budget should be balanced through cuts.

Against that backdrop, the state's numerous and powerful special interests — unions representing teachers, state workers and hospital workers, as well as school funding advocates — were mobilizing with an early-season blitz against the cuts.

"We know that this is only the beginning of a long process ahead," said spokesman Stephen Madarasz of the Civil Service Employees Association, which represents state and municipal workers.

He noted that the public employee union dipped into its annual ad budget of roughly \$1 million early to fund radio and TV spots assailing the cuts. The Public Employees Federation, another state worker union, took similar measures.

"It normally isn't busy this early," said PEF spokeswoman Darcy Wells.

Much of the focus, though, remained on Skelos, who has taken the clearest stance so far against approving the cuts.

In an interview Monday afternoon, Democratic Assembly Majority Speaker Sheldon Silver sided somewhat with Paterson, saying he agreed that sending over drafts of the budget bills is just as good as distributing the final bills.

But he also suggested there would be little point in having his chamber pass the cuts if they don't get through the Senate.

"We're not here to do symbols," said Silver.

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