



## Furlough: the Other “F” Word

— An Editorial by  
Local 17 Union  
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**M**erriam-  
Webster’s  
online

dictionary defines furlough as “a leave of absence from duty granted especially to a soldier.” The word comes from the Dutch word *verlof* meaning “permission to leave.”

You may not view yourself as a soldier, though I have heard many public employees talk about public service as akin to fighting in a war. I am sure you were not expecting to be on furlough during your non-military public service career. And I am sure that the civilian furlough does not hold the joyful or romantic connotations of a retreat that it holds for soldiers.

Instead, what furlough means for members is a pay cut. So why would the unions agree to a pay cut? Well, each unit has its reasons, but the biggest reason is fear. Fear that if there is no temporary pay cut now, there will be a permanent pay cut later in the form of a layoff. Also, when people are in need, members often want to help and are altruistic.

We have been told that if we don’t take the pay cut, we, people just like us, or maybe the person sitting next to us will be out of a job. But public employers are not willing to provide a list of the positions that will be cut if furloughs are rejected or saved. They don’t want to be forced to make the tough decisions. Instead, they look to the employees and say “dig into your pockets and give us your contractually guaranteed wage and hope that we will use it wisely.”

In most, if not all of the jurisdictions, where members have agreed to furloughs, there have still been layoffs and no real understanding of long-term positions or services saved. The reality is that furloughs really don’t save that much and can sometimes cost more than they are worth. They may be the answer to a short-term budget problem, but not the answer to long-term funding issues. The economy is evolving and long-term general funding is still uncertain. With economic indicators such as construction being down,

there is no amount of furlough that can fund or justify employing positions that have no work in the downturn. And for those positions that do have work, like public health services, if there is not the political will to support the public health infrastructure, there is no way employees can pay for the services that are unfunded in any permanent or long-term way by continuing to hand over their pay check.

For example, the furlough in King County was not equitable, even though it was understood that it would be. Only 40 percent of employees were furloughed, despite intent to furlough 100 percent and cost savings from dedicated funds could not help the area where there was a deficit, the General Fund.

“It was like putting a Band-Aid on a torn aorta; the bleeding didn’t stop and even if you felt better about the effort, everyone knew it was still bleeding,” Local 17 Union Representative Janet Parks said.

At best, it’s a temporary fix when a more long-term fiscal and philosophical change is necessary.

I, personally, do not support furloughs—mainly because they have been proposed as the entire solution without much long-term vision, while neglecting to thoroughly explore other options. But if membership wanted to explore them, my goal was to negotiate the best option possible and then let them choose. This is the democratic, union way.

In my units, there were many more creative solutions offered (such as a voluntary reduction in hours or other alternative work arrangements), but the employer was so fixated on furloughs it could not have a real, reasoned discussion. The other options would have taken real work and employers were not psychologically prepared to do it. It was too politically and emotionally costly.

There is a notion that public employees need to do their share. Furloughs are part of this. However, they are doing their share. They do more work with less money, are laid off, and watch years of work go down the tube as their innovative and successful programs are abolished. They are living with broken workplaces and communities.

Members want to be part of the solution, but so far, our requests have fallen on deaf ears. Time after time, union negotiating teams have sat at the table asking for the exact budget shortfalls with specific details and a list of positions slated for layoff.

With this information, employees and managers could target defined budget shortfalls with tailored solutions. Unfortunately, employer-wide furloughs, when offered as an exclusive solution, often miss the mark because they ignore the reality that large employers are complex and one solution does not usually fit all.

There were also other solutions offered. For example, many public jurisdictions rarely force businesses to pay fines when they violate codes and harm community resources, like ground water. Instead, these companies often get off the hook and benefit from shared resources while at the same time harming them. To force violators to pay would require a political will that stopped commissioners and other elected leaders from taking calls from developers and then pushing planning departments to not enforce code violation fines.

We know that furloughs are not the end answer—they are only one tool. To ignore the valued creativity of employees is to miss the opportunity to create real long-term solutions. Furloughs delay the tough decisions that we elect governments to make. Elected leaders and voters must be bold. We must make the tough decisions and not force public employees to hold the burden of whether services are provided to the community based on how much money they are willing to take out of their pay check. If the community wants services, at some point, they will have to pay for them.

We know furloughs sound like an easy answer to tough times, but there are no easy answers and no great options. There is pain all around, but there are also good processes that have the possibility of creating innovative, best outcomes, but they require real involvement of the unions and we must start with an open dialogue where all information the union requests is provided and employers stop playing “hide the ball.” That being said, if I had to vote for a furlough today, and there was a chance, even a remote one, that one of my co-workers jobs would be saved, would I vote “yes” for a furlough? Maybe. But that’s not the point.

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