

State union workers breathe sigh of relief

Governor issues a temporary reprieve

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ALBANY — Gov. George E. Pataki issued a reprieve last night, saying no pink slips would go out this week and no state unionized workers would be temporarily laid off if the Legislature adopts a budget by April 1.

But he warned that all bets are off if there is a budget impasse beyond April 1, which he hinted could potentially trigger the shutdown of government services and throw tens of thousands of people out of their jobs, including those on Staten Island.

Following a meeting with legislative leaders, Pataki said no pink slips would go out this week. He said he was miffed by reports and assertions by legislators that lay-off notices were planned to be issued yesterday.

Pataki stressed there is "absolutely no reason" for "any layoffs or furloughs" on or before April 1, other than the planned elimination of 11,000 jobs to balance the budget. There are about 211,000 state jobs that fall under the governor's control.

Since the state must give civil service workers 20 days advance notice of furloughs, no one would be out of a job because of a shutdown of certain services until April 10.

"The only thing I've been dissatisfied with is when you have legislators out there saying, 'Pink slips are coming out Friday, or they're going out on Monday or Tuesday.' And they have no basis for saying that," Pataki said.

"I think those who said last week that pink slips were going out Friday or Monday should apologize. They didn't go out."

But the near hysteria among union leaders and state employees over potential layoffs was fueled by the Pataki administration's own refusal last week to say the accounts were untrue.

Early yesterday, about 200 state workers protested against Pataki outside the Albany Omni

Hotel, where U.S. Senate Republican leader Bob Dole accepted the endorsement for president from top New York Republican officials across the state.

As for this week, Pataki said, "We will not be sending out pink slips."

But Pataki said that if the budget is not adopted by April 1, he will refuse to pass emergency spending bills to pay himself, the executive branch and the 211-seat Legislature and its 4,000 employees. He said it will not be business as usual.

As for the rest of the government, he said, "We are looking at what we believe can be shut down if a budget is not adopted on time. We are not going to get caught unprepared."

Those performing services affecting public health and safety would be exempt, such as prison guards at Arthur Kill Correctional Facility in Charleston or case workers at South Beach Psychiatric Center. But sources said the Department of Motor Vehicle Services and its employees could be part of a shutdown.

Pataki said he was just doing his job by using the threat of a massive shutdown of government services to help produce a budget.

"We don't want to see state workers laid off. We don't want to see them have any anxiety. If anyone should have anxiety, it should be the legislators. It's their job to pass the budget by April 1,

not the state workers' job," he said.

But Assemblyman Eric Vitaliano, who chairs the committee on governmental employees, likened Pataki's threat to "extortion" to force lawmakers to ram through a budget of his liking. "I assume he thinks the Legislature will cave in no matter what. State workers are nothing but pawns as far as the Pataki administration is concerned," the Dongan Hills Democrat said.

Added Vitaliano, "You're playing with human beings. It's not the way to treat your work force. It's not the way to get the best out of people."

Nonetheless, Vitaliano acknowledged that he was feeling the political heat. "My office is flooded with calls," he said.

Assemblyman Robert Straniere said Republicans will back Pataki in the crunch to cut taxes and close a projected \$5 billion deficit. "Our conference totally supports shutting down the state if necessary," the Republican said of the Assembly GOP.