

Prieto promises vote on bill to provide furloughed state workers with back pay

By Katherine Landergan

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TRENTON — Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto promised Thursday to post legislation by the end of July that would provide back-pay to state workers who were furloughed during last week's government shutdown — but not before hurling a few insults at Gov. Chris Christie.

The Democratic speaker and Republican governor have clashed over how to provide back-pay to the tens of thousands of people who were unable to report to work because of the shutdown. Prieto has said Christie could compensate the workers through executive action, something the governor and Senate President Stephen Sweeney say can't be done.

On Thursday, Prieto agreed to quickly move the bill, but doubled down on his assertion about the executive order, and even mocked Christie for the now infamous photos of him and his family lounging on a closed beach during the shutdown.

"You know what? He wants a bill, we'll give him a bill. That's not a problem at all," an uncharacteristically animated Prieto told dozens of public workers who rallied on the steps of the Statehouse for back pay. "But the one thing I can tell you — he has always found a way of doing things and I think he could do this (sign an executive order).

"He has found a way of borrowing \$300 million for Statehouse renovations without public approval or without the Legislature," Prieto said, referencing a dispute over whether the administration followed the appropriate protocol for approving the massive project. "He found himself, as that picture shows, to be able to be on a beach when the rest of us could not be on a beach. So he found a way to do things."

Earlier Thursday, the Senate, in a rare mid-July voting session, [approved the back-pay bill](#), 31-0, through an emergency vote. Despite saying state workers shouldn't "count on" getting back pay for the shutdown in the run up to the impasse, Christie said Wednesday he'd sign the bill as soon as it reaches his desk.

Speaking to reporters after Thursday's rally, Prieto said the reason he initially held off on introducing legislation to pay furloughed workers was because it will take much longer than an executive order. A lot of his members went on vacation, he said, making it difficult to lock down a voting session. But, Prieto said, he has narrowed down a few dates and planned to introduce the legislation later Thursday.

Most state workers missed one day of work during the shutdown, which started on a Saturday and ended in the early morning hours of July 4. But some parks and Motor Vehicle Commission workers missed weekend days as well. The state shut down over an impasse between Assembly Democrats and Christie on a bill that would restructure the state's largest health insurer, Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey.

At the Statehouse rally, organized by the Communications Workers of America, NJ State Director Hetty Rosenstein told the workers they have been used as leverage in the shutdown.

"We have been used as currency," she said. "But an amazing thing happened during the shutdown, there was one thing we found out: People don't want to lose us. Even for a day, even for three days."

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