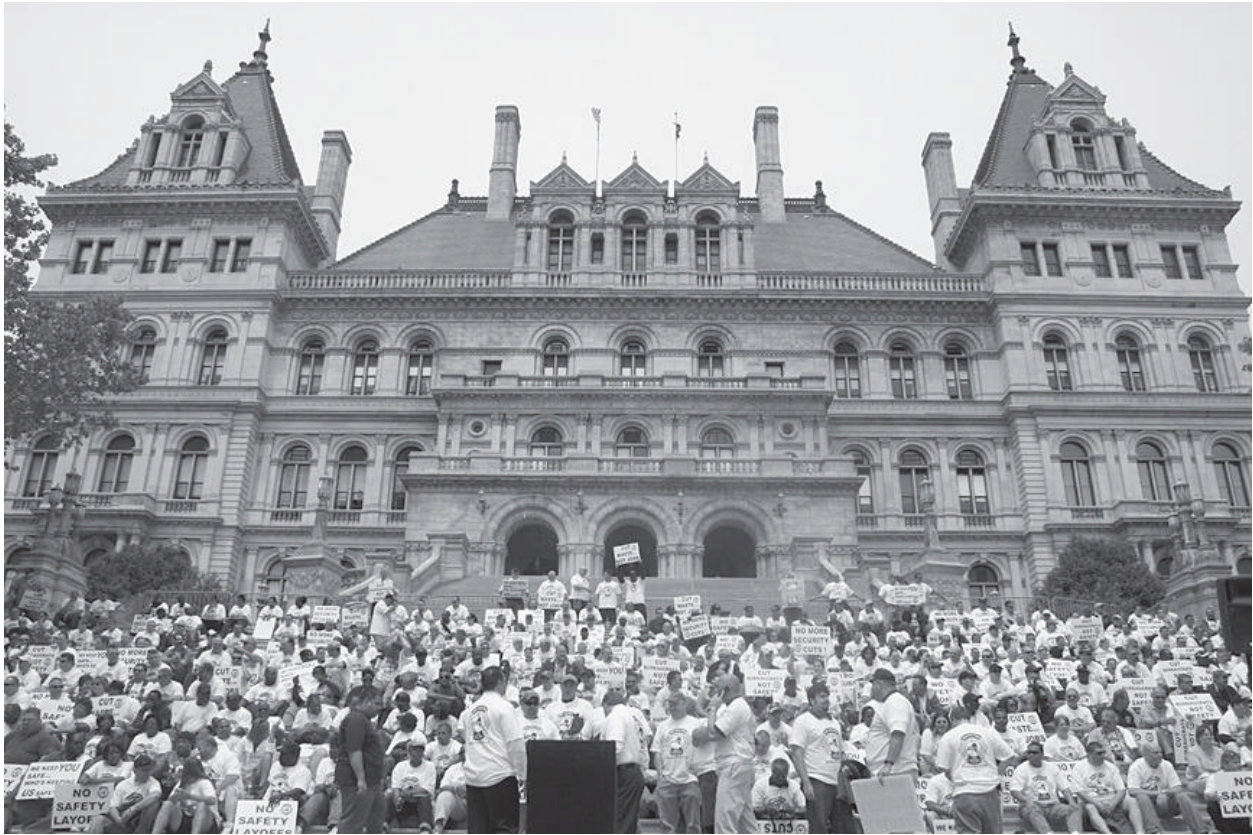


Corrections officers protest job cuts

Say overcrowding makes job dangerous

By MATTHEW ARCO
Gazette staff writer



Hundreds of state correctional officers were in Albany last week to protest job cuts and testify before

Assembly Republicans about what they call a top-heavy Department of Correctional Services.

Members of the New York State Correctional Officers and Police Benevolent Association told lawmakers on June 2 the state's prisons cannot afford, under the governor's proposal, to cut an estimated 2,000 union jobs from DOCS - cuts they say are not shared by those working at the administrative level in the state's corrections system.

“If there is pain to be borne by the employees of this state as a result of the state’s current fiscal crisis, such pain must be shared,” said union President Donn Rowe in testimony to Assembly GOP members. “The administration of the department has refused to share any of this pain and instead inflicts all of the pain on my membership.”

In an effort to get state worker unions to re-open their contracts and make concessions that would save the state money, Gov. David A. Paterson released a list in April calling for agencies to cut 8,700 jobs by July 1. The Department of Correctional Services was slated for 2,021 job cuts.

Issues discussed during the correctional officers’ lobbying day are part of an ongoing debate between the union and DOCS. At the forefront of the debate are concerns over prison capacity and the safety of corrections officers.

“Commissioner [Brian] Fischer recognizes that management and front-line staff must both be part of the department’s cost-cutting efforts, which is why he has reduced the number of administrative employees by 3 percent since April 1, 2008,” said DOCS spokesman Erik Kriss.

“That is a larger proportional cut than the 2 percent reduction in the number of correction officers during that time.”

Administrative positions that were eliminated and left vacant since April of last year saved taxpayers more than \$3 million, according to DOCS. The vacancies include an assistant commissioner, three department heads, five superintendents and 22 deputy superintendent positions.

But union members say the state can save money by trimming back on the millions of dollars spent on salaries and benefits for administrative positions.

NYSCOPBA has also long insisted the state’s prisons are operating over capacity and if more correctional officers’ jobs are cut, working conditions could become more dangerous.

“Despite a prison capacity operating in excess of 102.2 percent — with maximum security facilities operating at a dangerous 124 percent — Commissioner Brian Fischer continues to try to downplay the true inmate population to justify proposed cuts, while operating a bloated top-heavy department with staffing levels at a record high,” Rowe said to a cheering crowd of at least two hundred union members on the steps of the Capitol last week. “Before we cut officers whose job it is to actually secure our prisons, perhaps he should examine his own top-heavy department, fraught with an abundance of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. bureaucrats.”

DOCS disputes the prison capacity numbers cited by the union and says state prisons have numerous extra beds system wide. Population capacity reports are determined by the number of open beds a correctional facility has at any given time.

The department has 59,696 inmates, according to a June 2 DOCS population report of the entire state prison system. The report shows 60,957 general confinement beds, which are the number of permanent beds meant for everyday living — opposed to more than 5,000 special housing unit beds and more than 1,200 infirmary beds, which are not meant for permanently housing inmates. The report also posts 2,312 temporary beds, which DOCS includes as part of its general confinement bed total.

Since the number of inmates is below the amount of general confinement beds, the report shows that correctional facilities as a whole have enough beds and the state prison system is not over capacity. But the union arrives at a number that puts current prison capacity over 100 percent by subtracting the number of so-called temporary beds from the total number of general confinement beds. DOCS says doing so is a misrepresentation of its numbers since the majority of those temporary beds are actually general confinement beds and are in the process of being officially labeled as such

“The reality is that the vast majority of those beds, although labeled temporary, are not in fact temporary — they are permanent,” Kriss said.

NYSCOPBA also continuously cites the practice of “double bunking” as evidence of overcrowding and something that puts its members at risk. “If they have all these empty beds, why do we have double beds or why are inmates not given their own cells?” asked Chris Leo, legislative director for NYSCOPBA.

But DOCS says double bunks are strategically placed in facilities so that correctional officers can see the inmates at all times and they don’t block the view of other inmates.

“There’s no evidence that double bunking, as we have it configured in our system, has created any safety problems,” said Kriss. “The number of assaults by inmates — on staff or other inmates in our system — has come down in recent years, and stayed down,” he said. “In fact, in 2009 we are on track to have lower numbers than in 2008.”

Prior to the rally on the steps of the state Capitol, NYSCOPBA spoke directly to lawmakers in the Legislative Office Building during a public hearing on the state’s corrections system.

Testimony was given before the Assembly Minority Statewide Forums on Workforce Issues in the Correctional System, created last month and co-chaired by Assemblymen Joe Giglio, R-Gowanda, and Gary Finch, R-Springport.

The task force’s stated purpose is to get feedback from prison workers about issues they face behind prison walls by traveling around the state and hearing from them directly. The have tentatively scheduled forums in St. Lawrence, Saratoga, Franklin, Orange, Erie, Oneida and Herkimer counties.

“We think you do a heck of a great job, to be perfectly blunt,” Assembly Minority Leader Brian Kolb, R-Canandaigua, said to an audience of more than 100 NYSCOPBA members at the hearing.

“We’re going to work together with you... to make sure you’re staying safe.”

Lawmakers stirred the crowd of corrections officers who frequently cheered in approval of testimony and speeches given by both NYSCOPBA officials and lawmakers.

“We could not survive in a safe world without your efforts, your dedication and your professionalism,” said Assemblyman Joseph Saladino, R-Massapequa, who received a standing ovation from the crowd. “So we’re here thanking you for what you do. God bless you very much.”

