

# Suffolk employee union rebukes Steve Bellone over contract negotiations

The Suffolk Association of Municipal Employees hasn't had a contract since the end of 2016. A new contract has been stalled while the county executive negotiates for \$30 million in health care savings from unions.

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Suffolk's largest employee union rebuked County Executive Steve Bellone Sunday, the day before Labor Day, and called on him to "re-commit to labor negotiations" that are fair to members of all county unions.

In a "Labor Day Message to the Bellone Administration," Suffolk Association of Municipal Employees President Daniel C. Levler said he wouldn't accept a cost shift on health care that burdens union members, who he said are among the lowest paid workers on the county payroll. He said employees in the union are paid an average annual salary of \$60,000, while nonunion "exempt" appointees now make an average salary of more than \$100,000.



Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone speaks at a news conference on July 5. Photo Credit: Barry Sloan

"Maybe highly paid political appointees can afford to pay more for health care, but our nearly 6,000 working class members cannot," Levler said in a statement.

The Bellone administration on Sunday declined to comment.

The union hasn't had a contract since the end of 2016. A new contract has been stalled while Bellone, a Democrat, negotiates for \$30 million in health care savings from employee unions.

Newsday reported Sunday that tensions are building between Bellone and Suffolk Police Benevolent Association President Noel DiGerolamo, who is negotiating on behalf of 10 county employee bargaining groups over the health care plan. The law enforcement union is preparing an advertising campaign against Bellone.

Bellone last week said, "We have been and continue to be at the negotiating table and remain hopeful that we can reach an agreement that is fair to both taxpayers and to the union."

Levler said he was concerned that Bellone "was looking to strike a 'fair deal' with one union on health care."

"The County Executive must consider the impact of every decision against the fairness to taxpayers and all County Unions, including its largest Union," Levler said, adding, "As the majority of the County's health plan participants, we cannot accept cost shifts on health care that force our members to choose between putting food on the table or purchasing prescription drugs."

Levler also said that since Bellone took office, AME has weathered more than 1,000 layoffs and other job cuts.

In his state of the county speech earlier this year, Bellone called rising employee health costs "unsustainable" and the "biggest financial issue" facing Suffolk. He called for hiring a consultant to evaluate the county's current self-insurance model and determine why costs have skyrocketed, although it's unclear if one has been selected.