

Opposition accuses Williams of bullying unions over wage offer

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Newfoundland and Labrador Premier Danny Williams is facing accusations of bullying, the day after he told public sector unions to take the wage offer that's on the table or risk having it reduced.

Opposition leader Yvonne Jones said Wednesday in the house of assembly that Williams had gone too far by pressuring unions into accepting an offer with the threat it could be reduced.

"So I ask the premier, 'Why is government adopting such a heavy-handed approach and making pointed threats like this to union[s] through the media and not at the negotiating table where the discussion should be had?'" she said.

The premier said Tuesday that a government wage offer of 20 per cent over four years to unions such as the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Public Employees and the Newfoundland and Labrador Nurses' Union could be decreased if the price of oil drops further.

Williams said Wednesday he isn't threatening anyone and expressed shock that the unions wouldn't accept his offer.

"I'm at an actual loss to understand why these unions wouldn't grab this now while they can get it and while we are in a financial position to offer it to them," he said.

Future uncertain, premier says

Williams said nobody can predict what will happen with the global economy in its current state or say precisely what that could mean for the province's finances.

He also warned that if his government has to choose between social programs and public sector wages, the social programs will be his first pick.

Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Public Employees president Carol Furlong said she was surprised by the premier's comments, but doesn't think it will affect the deal her members get.

Furlong said she sought clarification from Finance Minister Jerome Kennedy last night after Williams's comments were made public.

"You know the minister has confirmed for me that that offer of 8, 4, 4 and 4 is there for NAPE, and we are hoping that we are soon going to be able to conclude bargaining," she said.

She said the premier's comments won't affect the province's largest public sector union's bargaining approach, and there could be a deal within days.