

County workers still 'sick' as state's mediator arrives

By NANCY BARR
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The "sickout" of Santa Cruz County employees continued today, even as a state mediator was to arrive to assist with negotiations.

County employees began their job action Monday, targeting different departments each day.

Penny Schantz, general manager of the Service Employees International Union Local 415, says 425 county employees are out today — a third of the entire work force. Departments affected are Health Services, including the clinics in Watsonville and at Emeline Street, the district attorney's Family Support Office, the entire information services, the people

who run county computers, and the operations people who fix them, the duplicating department that handles county mail, the auditor-controller, treasury and tax, the assessor, elections, special services and the court recorders.

County Administrative Officer George Newell said the sickout has caused slow downs in most departments but no serious problems. Each department has managed to take care of essential business with the personnel that did come to work.

Negotiations between SEIU Local 415 and the county reached impasse last week, before the contract expired Friday. Therefore, a state mediator has been called in, and was to begin discussions at 10 a.m. today.

The first task for the mediator, Newell said, is to determine the difference between the county's final offer and the union's final offer, since the two sides have been offering different interpretations of the figures.

The union is asking for a 4.5

percent raise in the first year of the two-year contract, and 5 percent in the second year. Union officials figure that because the second raise comes on top of the first, the raise will actually come to 9.7 percent total.

The county is offering raises every six months of 2.25, 2, 2.25 and 2 percent. Newell said that because of the raises being compounded on top of each other, it would come out to a 9.3 percent total increase.

But the union has interpreted the county's raise differently, saying it would amount to only a 7.7 percent increase in terms of the amount of cash an employee would be paid. That's because they are smaller raises spread out over time, union officials have said.

Newell called the union's interpretation of the figures "the wrong way of looking at it," pointing out that even without compounding the raises, and simply adding the percentage increases together, that the county's offer would come to 8.5 percent.

forecast

Fog and low clouds tonight and tomorrow morning, clearing by midday. Highs in the 70s.

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