

Employees issue city an ultimatum

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SANTA CRUZ — More than half of the city's employees issued an ultimatum this week that they intend to strike.

"I don't know if this is part of a strategy or if it's real, but I have to take it at face value and deal with it," said Mayor Neal Coonerty.

Union officials say they are being kept in the dark during discussions about layoffs and budget cuts that could affect their members, and that their repeated requests to deal with the issue have been ignored.

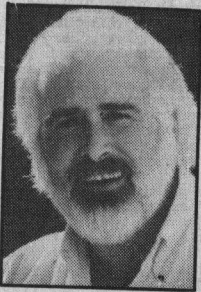
"We want to have the right to bargain, and we feel the city is not recognizing the union as a bargaining agent," said Tim McCormick, general manager of the Service Employees International Union, which represents 400 of the city's 700 employees.

SEIU members — who include clerical, maintenance, assistant planners and engineers, entry-level professional and library employees — gave a list of demands to the mayor and City Council this week that they want discussed publicly at the council meeting April 13.

They are demanding:

- The city allow grievances to be signed by union officials, without employees' signing the complaints.

- The city confer with the union when union members are laid off, and when vacated positions are left unfilled.



Union leader Tim McCormick wants workers to have a say in decisions.

- An ordinance be passed requiring the city and union to bargain in good faith.

"If we don't have some way of resolving these disputes short of going on strike, we're going to be at war," said McCormick.

But City Manager Richard Wilson says the latter two demands are already being met.

"We have always said we will meet and confer over effects of budget measures, and state law and the city's own employees' resolution provide all of what they are asking us to do in an ordinance," he said.

The first issue, about who should sign grievances, was decided by Santa Cruz County Superior Court Judge Tom Black last month. He ruled that under the union contract with the city, employees must sign grievances.

McCormick said that ruling left the union few choices — a final appeal to the City Council, an expensive civil law suit or a strike.

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Strike

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— Tim McCormick,
union leader

"We want a peaceful means of settlement, but if our only option is to resolve disputes in this manner, than that's what will happen," he said.

McCormick said he also is concerned that management is circumventing the union, and talking directly to employees about the problems.

City Personnel Director Erwin Young countered that department heads are simply meeting with employees to explain what is happening.

"I guess we're trying to provide as much information to the workers to help them find out what the issues are," he said.

Coonerty said the national recession, and its effects on the city, is part of the problem.

"It's going to be a very grim year, and since 60 percent of our budget is in personnel, I'm sure when we cut it's going to affect city employees," he said. "They're doing what they need to do to protect themselves."

McCormick stressed that he realized there are budget constraints, but he wants workers to have a say in decisions that will affect their jobs.

"We understand layoffs may happen, we may have to accept eliminating vacancies, but we want to see all the cards on the table," said McCormick. "All of this is because of budget cuts and layoffs we've been anticipating for some time."

Wharf construction worker William Malady agreed.

"This is an attempt to try to get some attention and let them know how serious we are," he said. "Most city employees are really dedicated to their jobs, and they're looking for some cooperative exchange of ideas."

Timothy Smith, a building maintenance worker, stressed that city staff don't want to strike.

"It's sad that it had to come to this," he said.

Coonerty said he hopes workers know they are being taken seriously and that city officials "trying to be open and inclusive."

"We have worked hard through some serious financial blows to be very protective of them," he said. "I don't want them to think we're taking it out of their hides solely."

Coonerty said it is odd that the union has not raised the same issues with the county, which is also leaving vacated positions unfilled.

"It seems like they're just hammering away at the city," he said.

McCormick said the difference between the city and the county, is that the county has been "totally cooperative" about meeting with the union about the issues.