

# Deal ends county strike



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Salary parity,  
better benefits  
offered workers  
Employees County

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SANTA CRUZ — County employees are claiming victory for themselves and working people after a three-day strike ended in salary parity and better benefits for some 2,000 laborers early Thursday morning.

"The county did not take working people seriously," said Cliff Tillman, executive director of Service Employees International Union Local 415. "This strike showed working people that when management puts offers on the table like the county's, people stand up. In large numbers our people said 'hell no,' and they walked."

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JEFF ALMQUIST,  
SUPERVISOR

SEIU members — 75 percent of the county work force — went on strike Monday after negotiations stalled, bringing county services to a standstill. Members sought salary parity with public workers in surrounding counties, more contribution to employee health plans and job stability and benefits for temporary workers.

The SEIU's contract with the county expired last Friday.

County officials said the deal is something

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A union sticker displayed prominently on her hard hat, county maintenance worker Marcelle McCarthy directs traffic around a road repair on Old San Jose Road on Thursday afternoon. The three-day county-workers strike ended earlier in the day when a tentative settlement was reached.



# Deal: Details under wraps

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both sides can be happy with.

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"(It's) a contract that both employees and management can be really proud of," said Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt. "It honors the people who do county work."

The details of the agreement are being kept under wraps until county workers vote on it this weekend.

But according to sources close to negotiations, the deal incrementally moves up wages to the eight-county, 2002 market average during the next four years. Also included is a 3 to 4 percent yearly cost-of-living increase. For benefits, the county will pay the full cost of employee health plans, and 75 percent of spouses and children's plans.

The Monterey Bay region has not seen a strike of this magnitude in decades, said Amy Newell, organizer for the Monterey Bay Central Labor Council.

"I think it can't do anything but help the local labor climate and affiliated unions in their (future) labor negotiations," Newell said.

The last round of marathon negotiations lasted from noon Wednesday until 4:30 a.m. Thursday.

"I had about four hours of sleep during the whole (three-day) period," said Nancy Elliott, SEIU county chapter president. "That part of it was pretty brutal."

Union members still have to vote on the deal to make it official. Vote meetings are scheduled for tonight in Watsonville and Saturday at Cabrillo College. Ballots will be counted Monday evening.

While the union's negotiating team didn't get everything it set out for, it came close, said Elliott, who expects some people will be unhappy the deal's

based on 2002 figures. More progress needs to be made on health plans as well, she said.

But the contract is still far better than what was offered last week, she said.

"The strike made an enormous difference in the package we were ultimately able to negotiate," Elliott said.

Both union and county leaders were impressed by the unity county workers displayed. The strike had 100 percent participation, which is rare, Elliott said.

A jovial mood permeated county buildings Thursday, with workers thankful to be back on the job.

"I'm very relieved," said Briana Kahoana, a mental health client specialist. "We are all service-oriented, and it was very hard on us not to be serving our clients. Management has been very welcoming and supportive, too. Some of them were even wearing purple today as a sign of support."

Kahoana, a licensed therapist who could make three times as much in the private sector, is thankful the new contract will let her keep her job. A single mother, Kahoana supports two children.

"I'm a fifth-generation Santa Cruzan. I want to serve my community — I don't want to have to go elsewhere," she said. "I don't want to make a killing, I just want to make a living."

Labor leaders said the SEIU's victory will not only improve the local market but help workers in other counties as well.

Monterey County employees have been keeping a close eye on local workers' crusade, said David Werlin, deputy director of SEIU Local 817, Monterey County's major bargaining unit. Many workers there earn even less than their Santa Cruz counterparts and will have to pay more for health care come January, Werlin said.

Local 817's contract expires next year. Werlin hopes Monterey officials learn from Santa Cruz leaders' mistake.

"We're in a very similar position here and our members are also very angry," he said. "I know the example of Santa Cruz County workers will give our members additional strength. They've seen that other folks (can fight for parity). In a county where there's never been a strike, Santa Cruz workers showed a lot of poise and a lot of courage."

The Monterey Bay Central Labor Council is hosting a victory benefit for county strikers Saturday night. The event will raise money for single parent strikers. It will be held in the auditorium at Loudon Nelson Community Center, 301 Center St., from 7-10 p.m.

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