

# Strike threat appears over; new vote set

By BOB SMITH  
STAFF WRITER

Santa Cruz County employees called off their strike last night after new negotiations showed promise of reaching a contract settlement.

The decision not to strike came after county officials huddled all day with representatives of Local 415 of the Service Employees International Union. The union had planned to call its 1,600 members out on strike this morning after employees rejected a county offer.

The county Board of Supervisors called a special meeting for 12:30 p.m. today to discuss the proposed settlement.

Board of Supervisors' Chairman Fred Keeley said he was "very pleased that we are able to reach a reasonable agreement with the work force that is in the best interest of the general public, the union membership and the management of the county."

County and union negotiators were scheduled to meet again at 3 p.m. today to wrap up the final details of a contract that will be submitted to employees for ratification.

Union General Manager Tim McCormick said this morning that the contract may be presented to the union membership for ratification tomorrow. He wants to hold sessions in Watsonville at noon and at the Santa Cruz Veterans Memorial Hall at 4 p.m.

"There's no final agreement," said acting County Personnel Director Mary Lou Alexander, "but we are inches away."

She said that agreement was reached on the major issues of

wages and health benefits. "We've shaken hands but we want board concurrence before discussing it," Alexander added, declining to discuss the major points of the contract this morning.

Santa Cruz County came within hours of its first-ever public employees' strike.

Nearly 1,000 employees — members of SEIU Local 415 — voted overwhelmingly Tuesday to reject a county offer and authorized a strike beginning today.

If the union members had walked off their jobs this morning, it would have left most county departments running with only a handful of management and non-striking workers. Deputy sheriffs and the detention officers who man the jails are not members of SEIU. And the union had promised to keep its members working in departments such as the 911 Emergency Communications, Child Protective Services and Juvenile Hall.

Yesterday, many county employees staged a "sick out" that left many departments with skeleton staffs of management and supervisors and some smaller offices closed completely.

Keeley said the chief negotiators — County Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello and McCormick — came to his office at 5 p.m. and reported "substantial progress."

Keeley said he asked them to keep talking and Mauriello called him at 3 a.m. this morning with the word that they had shaken hands on a tentative agreement that covers the major issues.

The union had already called off the strike, officials said.