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County workers summon mediator into stalled talks

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Santa Cruz County service employees called in a state mediator yesterday to help resolve a dispute centered on wage demands that has brought contract negotiations with the county to a halt.

With the approval of management representatives, leaders of Chapter 415 of the Service Employees International Union asked a representative of the state Mediation and Conciliation Board to help settle differences touching on pay, retirement benefits and employees' demand for binding arbitration.

The union met last night to discuss the county's contract offer and what tactics might be used in case the state mediator fails to resolve the impasse before the current contract expires tomorrow at midnight.

According to a union officer, one tactic under consideration is a sickout.

It's possible, the officer said, that there will be some departments where people will get sick.

However, the chapter's general manager, Penny Schantz, said that neither a sickout nor any other specific moves against the county were discussed.

According to union representatives, workers are asking for a 4.5 percent wage increase the first year and 5 percent the second year.

County Personnel Director Robert Palmer said the county offered workers an overall raise of 9.3 percent, as against the 9.5 percent the union is seeking. But union representatives value the county's offer at 6.5 percent because it calls for gradual increases of between 2 and 2.5

percent every six months so that most of it wouldn't be received over the whole two-year period.

David Leslie, county geologist and SEIU chapter president, called the county's salary offer a disappointment.

"The board of supervisors has chosen to ignore our request," Leslie said. "It is clear they do not see us as a big priority."

Union officials say the SEIU represents 1,250 county employees.

Palmer said the county simply can't afford to raise salaries beyond its last offer.

The second sticking point is the introduction of binding arbitration into the new contract. Palmer said the county is willing to approve the demand if union members in

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supervisory positions are released from the bargaining unit. At present, he said, they are in a difficult position as the first line of management while being members of the union.

Union representative Schantz, however, said the county's demand "is asking us to sell out members." She said the approximately 140 supervisors in the union have never indicated a desire to be removed from the bargaining unit.

Binding arbitration would require both management and workers to honor the decision of an outside negotiator when disagreements arise over interpretation or implementation of the new contract. At present, the County Administrative Office has the final say in such disputes. Because the office is an arm of management, union rep-

resentatives argue it is biased in favor of management.

The final demand in dispute is "safety retirement" for county employees in high-risk jobs, such as parole officers and Juvenile Hall employees. Among other provisions, this would affect about 50 county employees who, because of hazards involved with their jobs, might opt to retire early.

County representative Palmer said "safety retirement" is usually reserved for police officers or sheriff's deputies. He said parole and Juvenile Hall employees' pay is comparable