

County workers stop sick-in

Labor contract remains unsigned as negotiations continue

By STEVE SHENDER
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SANTA CRUZ — County government returned to business as usual Wednesday as most of the 1,266 workers who called in "sick" Tuesday returned to their jobs.

Meanwhile, negotiators for the county and for Service Employees International Union Local 415 — which represents 1,450 county employees — returned to the bargaining table in an effort to forge a new two-year contract to replace the one that expired at midnight, Sept. 30.

Local 415 General Manager Penny Schantz said Wednesday that in the wake of a two-day sickout which brought virtually all county business to a halt, "the ball's in (management's) court."

"People are back at work," she said. "The union is acting in good faith, in a very reasonable manner, to give management the opportunity to rethink their last proposal."

County Personnel Director Bob Palmer said meanwhile that the county had "improved" its offer to the union.

Palmer said shortly before 4 p.m. Wednesday that county negotiators had delivered their latest contract offer to union bargainers two hours earlier and were awaiting a response from the SEIU.

Wednesday night at least some county employees reportedly were being told another sick-out would occur today involving as many workers as stayed out Tuesday.

But Schantz refused to either confirm or deny these reports Wednesday night, saying, "There are millions of rumors flying around ... it's up to individuals to decide."

Negotiators for the county and the union have been sharply divided over wages, health benefits and a union demand for early retirement for employees who work at the Juvenile Hall and for the county Probation Department.

The union originally asked for a 25-percent pay raise over two years, but is now asking for a 15-percent increase. Union negotiators also want current health benefits maintained with no premium increases for employees, and optional "safety retirement" for Juvenile Hall and Probation Department workers at age 50. According to Schantz, Juvenile Hall and probation workers should be allowed to choose early retirement because of the risky nature of their jobs. She said those workers are willing to forgo pay increases in return for early retirement.

The county has offered the union an 8-percent, two-year pay increase. But it also has proposed boosts in health premiums. According to Schantz, the medical-plan increases will leave county workers with families 2-percent less take-home pay than they have now.

But according to Palmer, county workers will still come out ahead, because they will be able to pay the higher premiums with "pre-tax dollars."

Schantz said Santa Cruz County's push for increased health-plan premiums is unique in Northern California. She said three other Northern California counties with which SEIU has settled this year agreed to bigger wage increases than Santa Cruz County is currently offering — without any increases in medical premiums.

According to figures supplied by the union, the average county employee currently makes \$2,080 a month. The county's most recent offer

would boost that to \$2,162 a month in the first year of the new contract, and to \$2,249 monthly in the second year.

Palmer did not dispute those figures Wednesday.

But he disputed the union's medical-premium numbers.

According to the union, a married county worker whose spouse is on the medical plan would see his or her health premium rise from \$85.41 to \$254.71 a month under the county's contract offer. The \$169 monthly premium increase would thus cancel out the worker's \$169 monthly pay increase, according to the union.

The union claims that an employee with a spouse and children would see his or her medical premium jump \$217 a month over two years. That worker would end up with a net loss of \$48 a month — a 2-percent pay decrease, according to union officials.

Palmer said Wednesday, however, that the union's figures were out of date. He said the county had cut back on its proposed premium increases. For example, said Palmer, a county worker with a family would face a monthly premium hike of \$85.64 — not \$217 — under the county's most recent offer. Moreover, Palmer said, workers with families would still realize a 6.3-percent net gain in income, because they would only be taxed on what's left over after the medical premium payments are taken out of their checks.

The SEIU has already reached settlements with Monterey, Alameda and Santa Clara counties this year. In every case, according to Schantz, workers received bigger pay raises than Santa Cruz County has offered to date, without offsetting medical premium increases.