

Local

✓ of Employees - County RP 10/4/91 **County employees threaten to strike as negotiations stall** p. 9

By LANE WALLACE
STAFF WRITER

Saying contract talks have been "dismal," leaders of the largest union of Santa Cruz County employees on Monday will ask the membership to authorize a strike.

"Either a full strike or a limited one" will be considered, said Tim McCormick, general manager of the Service Employees International Union, which represents 1,632 of the 2,300 county workers. "Things are pretty dismal," McCormick said.

A strike authorization vote doesn't necessarily mean workers would walk out. The current contract does not expire until Oct. 11, and a strike could not begin before Oct. 12, McCormick said. Eleventh-hour agreements before strike deadlines are not uncommon in labor negotiations.

Because the 12th is a Saturday and Oct. 14 is a paid holiday (Columbus Day), it's unlikely a strike would begin before Oct. 15.

McCormick said the county is unwilling to meet the union's requests for a cost-of-living wage increase and maintenance of health benefits without raising the cost to employees.

The cost-of-living increase is between 3.6 and 4.5 percent, depending on which economic index is used, and the county is proposing less than 3.6, McCormick said. He

would not say how much the county is offering.

The county's intent, McCormick said, "is to charge people more and more" for health insurance. The county, McCormick said, is self-insured and "has one of the healthiest health plans I know of."

Mary Lou Alexander, acting county personnel director, said, "we do not have a package" for union members to accept or reject now.

Alexander and McCormick said negotiations went until 5 a.m. Wednesday and resumed at noon that day. Alexander said it was the union that broke off talks.

Although the key economic issues have not been resolved, "We have made great headway in many areas" of the contract, Alexander said.

The county's financial situation is "pretty gloomy," Alexander said. "We are not going to bargain to lay people off so others can have raises," she said.

County employees are completing a two-year contract which gave them raises of 4 percent the first year and 6 percent the second. They are asking for a one-year contract now.

Law-enforcement personnel, middle management and assistant district attorneys negotiate separately and are not involved in the current negotiations.