

Los Angeles County and public employees union reach tentative contract

Our correspondent
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The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 660, which represents over half of the county's 90,000 workers, have announced a tentative labor agreement covering the next three years. Most county employees have been working without an agreement since September.

The proposed agreement reportedly does not raise the workers' share of health care costs, which had been the sticking point in negotiations. The county had sought for the first time to impose payroll deductions on workers to cover a portion of health premiums, and a doubling of co-pay deductibles for medical services.

About 40 percent of the SEIU's 50,000 members live at or below the poverty level, which in Los Angeles does not cover family housing costs. Deductions could add up to thousands of dollars each year and put decent medical care out of reach for them.

The union had pledged to strike if any cuts in medical benefits were implemented. Two weeks ago, 2,000 county workers demonstrated outside the weekly meeting of the County Board of Supervisors. Some carried effigies of board members, while others chanted, "We draw the line" and "Our fight is your fight."

Local 660 leaders did nothing to join the dispute with those of striking LA transit workers and tens of thousands of grocery workers who walked out in southern California—both of whom are facing unprecedented attacks on their health care benefits.

The proposed three-year contract will have to be voted on by the union membership. Under its terms, there is a wage freeze for the first year and increases of 2.5% in each of the following two years. The county will fully cover the 2004 premium increases for hospitalization, health maintenance and limited dental

care.

The agreement includes a caveat that if a financial emergency is declared in Los Angeles County, then the raises are cancelled and the parties return to the bargaining table to renegotiate all of the issues.

Los Angeles County derives 20 percent of its \$16.9 billion budget from the state. The state faces a massive shortfall. In addition, the county is itself a billion dollars in debt.

Incoming governor Arnold Schwarzenegger is expected to demand that local governments renegotiate the contracts of county and municipal workers throughout the state. He has threatened to cancel an increase in the vehicle registration tax, which would strip \$4 billion from local entities.



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