

Non-teachers rally for wage increases

By Sean Flynn/Daily News staff

NEWPORT - More than 90 members of the union representing non-teaching personnel in the Newport School Department and some of their supporters rallied Tuesday night to protest what they called a lack of a decent wage offer from the School Committee.

"Our morale is at the bottom of the pit because of it," said Karen Benvenuto, a paraeducator at the Sullivan School.

Benvenuto was joined by other paraeducators - formerly called classroom aides - clerks, secretaries, custodians and information technology specialists as they first marched in front of Thompson Middle School and then heard speeches on the school's steps.

"What do we want?" they called out.

"Fair wages," they responded.

"When do want it?" they asked.

"Now," they answered.

The employees are asking for a 3.75 percent wage increase, which they say will put them in the range of what teachers and administrators received for the current school year.

Union members say that during three negotiation sessions, they were first offered 0 percent, then 1 percent and finally 1.75 percent raises. The final offer was boosted to 2.5 percent late last week, outside of a negotiation session.

This, they say, contrasts with what teachers received in a three-year contract approved last month. The teachers will receive a 3.25 percent pay raise for the current school year and raises of 3.75 percent in each of the 2006-07 and 2007-08 school years.

The union also has data showing the 26 top administrators in the School Department received salary increases in the current school year that average 4.55 percent.

After the rally outside in the rain, the protesting employees went into the School Committee meeting, where two of the union members addressed the School Committee during a public comment period.

Local 841 of Council 94, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees called for the rally after an apparent deadlock in limited contract negotiations for the current school year.

John Vars, business agent for Council 94, said the labor contract expired June 30, but back in December the School Committee asked for a one-year extension under what is called a "wage re-opener clause." The written agreement was that only wages would be discussed for the 2004-05 school year.

"Now they are renegeing on the deal," said Pete Sousa, a custodian at the Cranston-Calvert School.

Vars said the first negotiation session took place Aug. 16, despite the union's offer to start negotiating eight months earlier. The School Committee demanded the union share in the cost of the health-insurance plan in return for a raise, he said.

That, he said, was a violation of the agreement. Health insurance would be a topic only when negotiations for a full three-year contract open later this year.

"It's an unfair labor practice for them to address it now," Vars said at the rally. "They can't hold our wage increase hostage to us giving up another benefit."

"We believe you are not treating these employees in a fair and respectful manner," he told the School Committee. "We're not third-class citizens. We deserve your respect."

Union members argued their wages are far below what administrators and teachers earn.

With the School Committee's formerly proposed 1.75 percent increase, the wages would range from \$13.75 to \$19.96 per hour, according to the union. With the union's proposed 3.75 percent increase, those wages would range from \$14.02 to \$20.35 per hour.

Anna Marie Johnson, a paraeducator at the Sullivan School, said she is a single parent with two children. She said her income level and those of some other paraeducators put them at the poverty levels cited in the "Rhode Island Kids First" annual reports.

"This doesn't help by them not giving us a raise," she said. "The School Committee said they would talk only wages. I think they breached a contract."

Johnson said she spends \$75 every other month on medication for her daughter, because it is a prescription not covered by the health plan.

"I cut our grocery purchases to pay for that," she said.

The paraeducators say they work five to 5 1/2 hours a day, and because they have 25- to 27-hour workweeks, they must pay part of the cost of their health insurance. Only full-time employees of the bargaining unit receive free health insurance.

"We paraeducators are already paying 50 percent of our health benefits," Benvenuto told the School Committee. "You can't get blood from a stone."

School Superintendent John H. Ambrogi and School Committee members did not respond to any of the comments directed at them.

Ambrogi has said negotiations will continue and he will not discuss offers and counteroffers publicly.

© Copyright 2004 - 2001. The Newport Daily News. All Rights Reserved.

Without contract, school worker union rallies

School support staff members represented by Local 841, of Rhode Island Council 96, have been without a contract since June. Wages and health benefits are at issue.

01:00 AM EDT on Wednesday, October 12, 2005

**By RICHARD SALIT
Journal Staff Writer**

NEWPORT -- The union that represents school support staff took its dispute with the School Department public last night when it held a demonstration outside of a School Committee meeting.

Members of Local 841, of Rhode Island Council 94, rallied to protest how they have been treated by school officials. The union is made up of 140 teacher assistants, secretaries, custodians and maintenance staff.

Their three-year contract expired on June 30, but was extended 12 months because the School Department needed to focus its efforts on the expiring teachers contract. Both sides agree on that. They also agree that the extension called for a so-called reopener to discuss wages for this year.

"We said fine, as long as we are going to discuss wages and not any other issues," said John Vars, the union's senior business agent.

But when the talks got under way on Aug. 16, with a new School Committee and superintendent in place, the school officials began talking about health insurance concessions, Vars said. And when the union objected, Schools Supt. John Ambrogi proposed no salary increase, Vars said.

"We were upset with that," Vars said. "We said that's unacceptable."

Ambrogi said yesterday that the School Department's latest offer was a 2.5 percent wage increase. He confirmed the number only because of erroneous information that had been made public, he said.

He declined to elaborate, saying, "We're not going to talk about negotiations in public."

The Teachers Association Newport recently agreed to raises of 3.25 percent this year and 3.75 percent for the next two years. And for the first time, teachers will share in the cost

of their health insurance. They will pay 5 percent of the cost of their premiums the first year, increasing to 7 percent and 10 percent the next two years.

"They were looking for a copay on health. We already do," Vars said.

Part-time workers, he said, pay 50 percent of their premiums. Of the full-time employees, some pay 3 percent of their premiums and others, on a different health plan, pay none, he said. Everyone hired after 1997 pays an annual fixed amount, either \$100 for an individual plan or \$200 for a family plan.

The union, said Vars, wouldn't entertain any figures because the reopener was supposed to be restricted to wages.

"Both parties gave up something to not enter into negotiations for a full contract," Vars said.

The wages being offered by the School Department are unfair, he said, because other employees have received more and because the members of Local 841 are among the lowest paid. Their average salary is \$28,000 a year, according to the union. In addition to the raises of more than 3 percent for teachers, nonunion employees in the department are getting pay hikes of 3 percent to 8 percent, Vars said.

"We are just looking for a fair wage," said Vars.

The School Department's tactics don't bode well for the negotiations that will have to begin soon on a new three-year pact, Vars said. The contract extensions expire June 30.

If talks keep going the way they are going, said Vars, school officials "will really be setting the wrong tone for negotiations. We feel they have no respect for the support staff by the way they are acting right now."

Reporter Richard Salit can be reached at (401) 277-7467 or by e-mail at rsalitATprojo.com.

Online at: http://www.projo.com/eastbay/content/projo_20051012_ntdemo12.13133a64.html