

Fresno Unified teachers, administrators reach tentative contract deal

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Hannah Furfaro



Fresno Unified teachers protest over stalled contract talks in front of district headquarters on Wednesday, May 14, 2014.

HANNAH FURFARO / THE FRESNO BEE

Contentious contract talks between Fresno Unified administrators and teachers are apparently over, nearly a year after they began and only after both sides met with a state mediator to iron out a deal over compensation, benefits and responsibilities.

After two days of mediation talks that went into the wee hours of Thursday morning, the parties released a joint statement announcing the tentative agreement that resolves ongoing issues over teacher pay and benefits and how many hours teachers are expected to spend on campus each day.

"It's a win for our membership and the community," said Fresno Teachers Association President Eva Ruiz. "Our members can now start focusing on beginning a new school year."

Ruiz said the agreement includes a 2.7% retroactive pay raise for the 2013-14 school year, plus a 3.5% raise effective July 1 -- which the district initially offered. Teachers, frustrated by years without a raise, had sought a 15.5% raise over two years to help them recover from the recession-era wage slump. Even so, FTA's executive board ratified the plan Thursday afternoon.

Ruiz said the union had some big wins, including a measure that maintains a seven-hour duty day for teachers and allows them to manage their own preparation time. The district will also contribute \$1,025 more to each employee's health plan annually, she said.

The rest of the union's 3,500 members are expected to sign off later this month. Passing the plan requires a simple majority. The school board will then take up the measure.

District spokeswoman Micheline Golden declined to comment or confirm any specifics. It's unclear how one of the district's biggest aims -- a plan to extend the class day by 30 minutes at 20 schools next year -- was resolved.

Negotiations that have run almost a year seemed to be at a breaking point in recent weeks. After an initial go at mediation failed, teachers began showing up by the hundreds at school board meetings to make their concerns known. Nearly 1,000 teachers rallied before the trustees' meeting last week, marching in downtown Fresno with megaphones and drums.

When the district stuck by its offer, union officials threatened a strike.

Trustee Michelle Asadoorian said she's encouraged by the deal, noting the threat of a strike was "more than a threat, it was a real possibility down the road."

"It wasn't just talk, I think they were really intending on moving forward with it if they needed to," she said. "If everybody comes to a mutual agreement, it's really going to be the best."

Trustee Luis Chavez says he's pleased to see positive movement just a day after the board passed its \$726 million budget for next school year.

"We want to make sure we have great teachers and compensate them accordingly," he said.

Trustee Janet Ryan declined to comment and Trustee Carol Mills and Board President Valerie Davis said they could not provide additional details.

Also this week, State Center Community College District officials and the college system's teachers union signed a contract that marks the first raise for most employees since the 2008-09 school year, when faculty got a 1.7% boost.

The offer signed this week gives professors, part-timers, managers and certain other employees a 2% raise, plus a one-time 2% bonus for the 2013-14 school year -- a deal totaling \$1.9 million. They'll also get a cost-of-living increase for the next three years and another one-time bonus.

Interim Chancellor Bill Stewart said employees have worked for the better part of the past five years without a contract. Talks were drawn out because "there hasn't been a whole lot of money to negotiate for, quite frankly," Stewart said. When he took over for Chancellor Deborah Blue earlier this year, he found people on both sides were tired of the stalemate.

"With the good will of the people that are there (in the union), I made them an offer that they decided to take and they took in one evening," he said. State Center's governing board approved the plan on Tuesday.

Lacy Barnes, State Center Federation of Teachers president, said the raise amounts to about 1% per year

since 2008-09.

"It's not a huge amount of money, but it's fair," she said. "It lets folks know we know you're working hard, and we value you."

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