

Fresno County reaches agreement with its largest union

By Marc Benjamin
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Fresno County officials confirmed Wednesday that a tentative agreement has been reached with its largest union, a contract offering 9% in raises by July 2017 if the Service Employees International Union membership ratifies the proposal.

The tentative deal comes on the heels of a decision two weeks ago by the state Public Employment Relations Board that found in favor of Fresno County negotiators after SEIU filed unfair labor practices. The unfair labor practices allegation stemmed from a unilateral decision made by Fresno County supervisors to cut employee wages by 9% in 2011.

The latest offer is the same as one made by Fresno County supervisors prior to the state ruling, said John Navarrette, county administrative officer.

“We are grateful and happy we have reached an agreement that could be ratified,” Navarrette said.

If the proposal wins a ratification vote and approval by supervisors, 4,400 SEIU employees would get a 5% raise as early as next month, followed by a 1.5% raise in July 2016 and a 2.5% increase in July 2017. Under the agreement, the union also would not appeal the state employment board’s decision. The cost of the contract is about \$28 million over three years.

In October, the union rejected an offer of a 2% raise that was to take effect the next month and another 3% in August.

Riley Talford, an SEIU unit shop steward and juvenile corrections officer, said he was optimistic about the county’s latest offer, because it was the same proposal made prior to the state personnel board ruling.

“Fresno County fell behind a lot of other counties that are offering better benefits and salaries,” Talford said. “I’m sure it’s one of the things the board was considering in trying to make the members as close to whole as possible. Hopefully, this does a little bit to help us catch up.”

Talford said a vote of the union’s membership is expected in about two weeks.

“I do believe a majority of members will vote to ratify the contract and move forward,” he said. “It’s time for the county and the work force to heal.”

Before the state ruling, he said, SEIU members were reluctant to agree on a contract, because if they had won the state ruling the county could have been liable for back pay at 7% interest to the union members.

“It’s good that the personnel board (decision) is behind us,” Talford said. “It was the elephant in the room.”

Eulalio Gomez, another correctional officer leading a group trying to sever ties from SEIU, said he thinks employees “deserve more than the 9% for the four years of hardships they endured.”

Supervisor Andreas Borgeas said the agreement is an opportunity to usher in a period of labor-management peace.

“This is a very fair, reasonable and financially sustainable offer that puts us back on the right track of restoring salaries lost and honoring the sacrifices made by county employees,” he said.

Supervisor Henry R. Perea said he was interested in returning the 9% sooner, but the negotiations resulted in the two-

year time frame.

He credited new board members Buddy Mendes and Brian Pacheco for making a difference in getting a deal done.

“This new board definitely wanted to return all employees all the money that was taken,” Perea said. “We understand the time (2011) called for serious reductions and that time has passed. This board feels it was only fair to restore the wages.”

Pacheco said he thinks the raise package is a fair deal and that county finances have improved enough to restore the cuts.

Mendes said he wanted to ensure that the employees got back to where they were financially as fast as the county could afford it.

“I was very adamant that we do what we did,” he said. “We continued to do the right thing and that sent a signal that we are not about games anymore.”

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