



Newsletter

"Democracy in Education, Education for Democracy"

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Negotiations & Health Insurance

We are well aware that the faculty is getting more frustrated that an agreement for 2004-2007 has not been reached. Faculty have not had an increase in salary since July 1, 2002 (4.5%). In the interim, the year 2003-2004 brought only a stop-gap contract with substantial increases in presidential salary adjustments and faculty development funds (considerably more than any other state union). This Union was preparing to negotiate a successor agreement in the summer of 2004.

Throughout the summer and most of the fall of 2004, the question of with whom we would negotiate, and whether it would be a reconstituted Board of Governors (sans legislators – Separation of Powers) remained unresolved. In addition, we suspected that health insurance would emerge as a wild card once we could get started. We soon learned that health insurance would become an issue in flux – and still is (more later).

Two events accelerated our desire to reach an agreement. First, without any indication or predisposition, the BoG and the URI faculty met, and, to the AAUP's surprise, a minimum of negotiation sessions ensued before a tentative agreement (T.A.) was reached. It is important to note that the faculty at URI ratified the T.A. on Thursday, Oct. 21, 2004. The BoG finally ratified the URI contract on Jan. 10, 2005. The ratification necessitated another vote by the faculty because the BoG added an additional health insurance clause *after the agreement had been reached*:

In the event that an agreement on premium sharing is not reached with the Working Rhode Island union coalition, the Board of Governors and the AAUP agree to implement, in the same manner and with the same effective date, the first agreement on premium sharing that may be reached between the Department of Administration and ANY BARGAINING UNIT, EXCEPT THE ASSOCIATION OF ADMINISTRATION SUPERVISORS, THE ASSOCIATION OF BUDGET OFFICERS AND THE PHYSICIANS ASSOCIATION. [Emphasis in original.]

This language was ratified by the URI faculty on Jan. 13, 2005. They have a contract but health insurance remains unresolved because the new language leaves open the possibility that any bargaining unit of state employees may accept a lower level of benefits and the introduction of premium-sharing, in which case those give-backs would be imposed on URI faculty. According to the URI AAUP, the faculty was willing to accept the risk of premiums and lower coverage in exchange for salary increases of 3.5% per year for three years. As of today, no other state employee bargaining unit has reached a T.A.

Second, we were hopeful that Working RI, a coalition of state unions, could negotiate an equitable agreement with the state on health insurance. This was the first time that labor sat at the table and collectively negotiated for health insurance. Working RI was unsuccessful for the reasons delineated below.

RIC/AFT negotiating sessions with the BoG were held on Dec. 10, 29, Jan. 13, 18, 27, Feb. 7 and 25. Feb. 22 was cancelled due to the BoG chief negotiator's illness. The next meetings, including each team's caucuses, are to be held on Mar. 3 and 7. There have been many pre-negotiating sessions (the RIC/AFT team reviews BoG proposals and assesses strategies). The RIC/AFT has and will seek to arrange dates so that we can reach closure. Anne Marie Coleman, the BoG's chief negotiator, is presiding over eleven other contract talks (including the PSA at RIC) and dates are at a premium. I honestly believe that both sides wish to complete the process and move on to other priorities.

Labor law precludes us from divulging proposals and issues at the bargaining table. However, the RIC/AFT negotiating team, the Executive Committee and the officers are unwilling to conclude deliberations just for the sake of immediacy, which would be deleterious to the faculty's best interests. The process is deliberate, purposive and progressive. Our present agreement is an excellent document, but it must be altered to reflect present day academia and the reality of being a faculty member at RIC. By this I mean the outside world has changed the way some of our activities are conducted, and our Contract needs to be brought up to date.

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The RIC/AFT was dismayed to learn recently that Governor Carcieri decided to break off negotiations with Working RI. The coalition, of which the RIC/AFT is a member, had banded together for the first time to engage in negotiations over health insurance and salaries with the Department of Administration.

Working RI met for several months with the State to negotiate over health insurance and salaries. In December of 2004 and January of 2005, the parties met frequently in an effort to set a pact for virtually all of the state's employees. From the information the RIC/AFT has gathered, the Governor's demands were outrageous, singularly focused, and political in nature. Although Working RI looked at a variety of ways to change elements of the health insurance plan to achieve significant savings without diminishing benefits, the Governor remained fixated on his political objective of winning a health insurance premium co-pay. For many state employees, the Governor's proposal would have usurped the pay increase he proposed as part of his envisioned package.

The unions share their outrage over the failure of the state to negotiate salary increases and a fair health insurance benefit. It has been almost three years since the last across-the-board salary increase, and so many faculty members have been asked and expected to take on significantly increased workloads during this period.

The coalition's unions are now bargaining individually with the state over all terms, including health insurance and salary. The unions have expressed their continuing solidarity, and their commitment to communicate with each other and maintain the unity they achieved through Working RI. The RIC/AFT recently learned that the proposal made to AFSCME Council 94 would dramatically reduce health insurance benefits, introduce significant premium co-pays, deductibles, and nearly double prescription co-pays. The unions plan to continue to meet regularly to devise strategies to achieve a fair compensation and salary package.

As of the date of this newsletter, only one of the unions under the BoG has settled its negotiations. The BoG has historically had limited ability to shape its own health insurance package, as it has been bound to health insurance benefit extended by the Department of Administration. Through the ongoing efforts of the coalition, however, the RIC/AFT will continue to work to gain the best health insurance package it can.

Jason L. Blank, President