Why No Contract?

The short version is: “We don’t know, we’re frustrated, but we’re not giving up.” Do we expect a contract by the time classes resume NEXT MONTH(!!!)? We’re hopeful, but it takes two sides to come to an agreement.

The purpose of this special summer Newsletter is to apprise you of progress (and lack thereof) at the mid-point of the summer break.

After 30 Negotiating Committee meetings since March, there is still no new contract. Those meetings break down into several categories: seven pre-negotiation sessions, 12 formal negotiation sessions with the BoG team, seven meetings with the coalition of unions which bargain with the BoG, three informal meetings with the BoG, and an open meeting at the BoG. The 31st meeting, scheduled for Monday, July 11, will be another session with the coalition. Prior to this year, the most difficult cycle required about half the meetings and a quarter of the work that has gone into this year’s contract process. So, why no contract?

As you all know, we cannot discuss specifics through the media (ours or the mass media) until we have a tentative agreement, however what we can say is that those issues that we have come to agreements on, pertain to working issues on this campus and represent a positive direction from both our standpoint and that of the administration. As in past negotiations, President Nazarian has made very constructive impacts on the bargaining process.

The talks have been more difficult in areas of salary and benefits. As has been reported in the news, public employee unions across the state are accepting co-payment of their medical insurance premiums, calculated as a percent of salary. In addition, URI faculty and staff accepted a contract for three years, at 3.5% per year, including a retroactive increase of 3.5% for 2004-2005. At the same time, URI faculty are expecting health insurance premiums to begin at some point in the future (because retroactive payments cannot be collected) and the state is asking employee unions to implement co-pays retroactively. The difference between implementing
co-pays at the time a contract is signed versus retroactively to the previous year, for the average RIC faculty member, is about $1,200. That amounts to a typical full year’s salary increase after three years of no increases – it extends our salary freezes for an extra year.

Bottom lines:
- The BoG’s tradition of parity among higher education unions requires any co-pays of health insurance premiums by RIC and CCRI employees be implemented at the time a contract is signed and not retroactively, because the BOG agreed to those conditions with URI.
- Even if the BoG had not reached the agreement with URI, the imposition of retroactive premiums is a dishonest way to deal with employees, and is not conducive to collaborative working conditions. Over the years, BoG employees have accommodated the state through numerous financial crises. We’ve taken more of our share of the hits. In fact, our lack of health premium co-pays is part of a formula that recognizes our low salaries. Now, they’re (disingenuously) arguing that we’re over-privileged, and, to twist the knife even more, trying to pinch our wallets into the past.
- There is no proposal on the table from the BoG – they’ve made no formal offers. The governor has gone public (arguably against the law) with punitive demands, but the BoG team has made no official proposals to us. Ideas have been voiced by their team members, and responded to by the coalition of BoG unions. We’re still waiting for them to come to the table with a salary-benefit package of any kind – thirteen months after the former contract expired. That’s a major source of our frustration; that and the news we hear of the state’s dealing with other public employee unions.

In spite of all this, we’re hopeful that before we reconvene the last week of August for the fall, 2006 semester, we will have good news to report to RIC/AFT members. Our optimism comes from our positive working relationship with the BoG over the years. At the same time, we’re concerned that the higher powers on Smith Street may be constraining the BoG’s ability to bargain in good faith.

President Blank’s Statement to BoG

Jason Blank attended the BoG meeting on June 30, and made this statement during the Open Forum phase of the meeting.

Chairman Caprio, members of the board of Governors for Higher Education.

I am Jason Blank, Associate Professor of Sociology and President of the RIC/AFT, Local 1819 the faculty Union at Rhode Island College. With very few exceptions, during the past 40 years, I have not addressed the Board. Most of the time, problems have been resolved either on our campus or informally with the Board. Essentially, this has been for Labor Peace with the Board. However, because of our present status without a Contract, I am compelled to speak out for our members. Until now, all our frustration has been directed at the Governor. At a rally on campus on May 4th, I said we are frustrated by the Governor’s reluctance to recognize and to equitably compensate us for our contributions to the state and to those we serve. At the very same rally, I said that on this May 4th RI Independence Day, we declare our freedom, our solidarity, we demand equity and we demand dignity! At a small demonstration, which in no way interfered with the Commencement, we also declared our solidarity, again directed at the Governor. As you are all aware, on June 1st at a rally at the State House, the frustration was directed almost entirely at the Governor.
Now our focus has changed. The impediment seems to the Board of Governors for Higher Education. Do the right thing! You are very aware that the salaries at the University, College and Community College are well below the salaries relative to similar institutions. Faculty accepted lower salaries in return for a favorable benefits package. The rules have changed. At the present time, at RIC our Full professors are at the 24%ile, at the Associate level the 30%ile, and at the Assistant level the 42%ile in relation to comparable institutions. This Contract will in all probability drop us even more; we are not addressing the salary equity at this time. However, the issue of Health Insurance is inextricably entwined with salary. The Rules have changed.

We are realists; we know that Health Insurance co-pays are a fact. We also know that the URI faculty has received a 3.5% retroactive salary increase (for 2004/05). We ask the Board of Governors for Higher Education to do the right thing! We are asking that equity, fairness and parity be the watchwords. We hope that you want a Contract now as much as we all do. Board of Governors for Higher Education, please do the right thing!

**RIC-AFT Joins Thousands at Statehouse Rally**

About 50 RIC/AFT faculty and 30 PSA@RIC members attended the June 1st Rally for Respect. Dan Weisman took these photos of RIC/AFT members at the rally.