

POST GUILD UNIT

FORUM



Local

32035

The Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild

**No
Worker
Left Behind**

Washington-Baltimore
Newspaper Guild

SEPTEMBER 15, 2005

LABOR NEGOTIATIONS BEGIN AT POST

Negotiations for a new labor contract began Wednesday between Washington Post management and The Newspaper Guild, which represents about 1,350 employees in The Washington Post's news and commercial departments. Opening talks were cordial, although the two sides expressed very different perspectives on the financial health of The Post and how its profits ought to be distributed. The goal is to achieve a settlement by Nov. 7, when the current contract expires.

Bargaining under the motto "**No Worker Left Behind**," the Guild emphasized the need for all employees to receive a fairer share of the profits we all bring in, not only for the newspaper but also for the Web site, which is now in the black.

First, the Guild proposed an immediate wage increase to catch up with inflation, which has outstripped contractual wage gains at The Post by about seven percent locally since the expiration of the last contract. The Guild also proposed 1.5 percent wage increases every six months after that, roughly equivalent to those recently agreed to in labor negotiations at a number of similar publications across the country, including the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and Newsweek, which is owned by the Washington Post Co. The Guild

also called for a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) clause, which would ensure that wages are not eroded by inflation when that rate exceeds 2 percent per year.

Solid wage gains are needed given the "absolutely stunning increase in the cost of living in the D.C. area," said Guild chief negotiator Rick Ehrmann, pointing to a Metro story in Wednesday's paper highlighting the crisis. "It turns out our area is the third most expensive in the nation," Ehrmann said.

The Guild also proposed modest but important improvements in the company's benefits package, including enhanced pension, holiday, vacation and sick leave benefits, and increased protections with regard to job security and basic rights in the workplace. Details of the Guild's proposals appear below.

Post Vice President for labor Trish Dunn, the company's chief negotiator, warned that declining circulation, increases in the cost of newsprint and ink and assorted fiscal uncertainties made it unrealistic for employees to expect a generous package of wage gains or benefit improvements. Dunn did not reveal profit margins for the newspaper itself (the company publicly reports figures only for the "newspaper division," which includes The Post and other assets). And by providing

advertising data only in terms of inches of ads sold, not in terms of dollars taken in -- and by leaving out of her presentation any mention of the increasingly important share of revenue obtained from advertising inserts -- she left unclear for now the true health of The Post's advertising base.

"We are not pleading poverty," Dunn assured Guild bargainers, in apparent acknowledgment of the newspaper division's recently reported profit margin of 15 percent. "But we are predicting very serious challenges." The company is not planning layoffs, Dunn continued. "We prefer to find other ways to cut costs than laying off employees."

Dunn then unveiled the company's proposal, under which employees would endure more than a year and a half without any wage increases (our last contractual increases occurred in April). Instead it would offer, upon contract ratification, a one-time, lump sum cash payment of \$1,000 for employees who work 30 or more hours per week and \$750 for those who work fewer hours. The first real raises would kick in a year later, in the amount of \$9 a week, or about \$470 a year. That's less than a 1 percent increase in salary for employees making \$50,000 a year, and less than a 0.5 percent increase for employees earning \$100,000 a year.

Three additional \$9-a-week raises would follow at six-month intervals after that.

Some of the other provisions the company is seeking to include:

- A new policy on comp time. Rather than having unused comp time paid out every quarter as is the current practice, employees would have to wait anywhere from six months to a year to get paid for extra days worked. And the number of days eligible for cash compensation would be limited to 10 per year.
- A new, "streamlined" disciplinary system that would

allow managers to fire employees after just two written warnings for minor offenses such as arriving at work a few minutes late. Currently employees receive an escalating series of warnings and suspensions before they are at risk of being fired for minor offenses.

- Newly tightened rules on maternity and paternity leave that could reduce employees' current flexibility as to the timing and use of this long-standing, family-friendly benefit.
- Retiree medical benefits would be reduced and perhaps eliminated for retirees pre age 65. Details still to come.
- Expense reimbursement. The company would be allowed to decline to reimburse employees for work-related expenses if the employee does not file for reimbursement quickly enough -- with details not spelled out.
- Would eliminate paper pay stubs in favor of a password-protected electronic system through which employees (who have computers) could see the information on those stubs.
- Probation periods would be extended to nine months (from six) for some positions.
- Guild protections. As is common in such negotiations with The Post, management is seeking to exclude many new and existing positions from Guild contract protections, including all night editors and deputy copy chiefs.

Here are the Guild's central proposals:

- Immediate inflation catch-up of 7 percent; 1.5 percent increases at 6-month intervals; and COLA protections for inflation in excess of 2 percent.
- Health insurance premium caps for part-timers, who have

- been especially hard hit under the Post plans in recent years.
- Enhanced information from the company to the Guild on pay distribution by race, gender and job to enhance the Guild's ability to make sure the company is dealing appropriately with diversity issues.
 - Increase night differential to \$8 per shift (currently \$6).
 - Create weekend differential of \$20 per shift.
 - Provide a system of compensation for significant contributions to the Web.
 - Improved pension benefits.
 - Dollar-for-dollar company match for MetroChek program (currently The Post allows employees to use pre-tax dollars for this transit program, but does not contribute company funds as other employers do).
 - Make Veterans Day a paid holiday.
 - Expand sick leave policy to allow up to 15 days of sick leave a year to be used toward the care of an ill spouse, domestic partner or parent (currently it can be used only when the employee or a child is sick).
 - Increase 401(k) match to 5.5 percent (currently 5 percent for Guild-covered employees and 5.5 percent for managers and other exempt employees).
 - Increase the number of personal leave days for employees with high balances of unused sick days.

- Make part-timers and employees in phased retirement eligible for buyouts.
- Expand vacation and personal leave program for seriously ill employees.
- Seeks to establishment of an employee profit sharing plan and an employee stock purchase plan
- Seeks upgrades for new positions in news and commercial departments.

YOUR REPRESENTATIVES ON THE BARGAINING COMMITTEE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU. WE WILL BE WORKING VERY HARD IN THE WEEKS TO COME TO WIN A FAIR CONTRACT FOR EVERYONE WHO HELPS MAKE THE POST THE GREAT PAPER THAT IT IS.

**ANNE MARIE DITCHEY
ANN GERHART
ROBIN GROOM
VERONICA INGRAM
STEPHEN KING
GERALD MARTINEAU
DARLENE MEYER
DAVID ROBIE
KEITH SINZINGER
RICK WEISS
RICK EHRMANN
ROBERT PIERRE**

CONGRATULATIONS
to
Darlene Fletcher
of the
BDU Advertising Department!!
Darlene won an **I-POD** shuffle as a part of the Guild's No Worker Left Behind Recruitment New Member Campaign. As a New Member your name is entered into a drawing for prizes and giveaways.
SIGN UP TODAY!!!!

HELP BUILD OUR COMMUNICATIONS NETWORK!!!!!!
PLEASE SEND YOUR HOME E-MAIL ADDRESS TO:
JMILLHOUSE@WBNG.ORG