

Buyouts. Again.

(Aug. 12, 2011) After an intense period of bargaining, the Guild agreed today to terms of The Sun's voluntary separation plan, opening the door for 83 members to be eligible for buyouts. Members should receive packets no later than Tuesday, August 16.

The company is committed to accepting up to 22 subscribers to the buyout program, (with the possibly of approving more if the program is over-subscribed) across all areas of the Guild bargaining unit. There are caps within the classifications eligible; the company can exceed those caps at its discretion. If The Sun receives more applicants than the cap, the company will select employees based on seniority.

The separation plan is open to columnists (cap of 2), critics (cap of 2), editorial writers (cap of 1), copy editors (cap of 2), design editors (cap of 2) and photographers (cap of 1) in the newsroom.

In advertising, account executives senior account executives and group supervisors (cap of 1), sales assistants and senior sales assistants (cap of 1). In the Advertising Operations department, make-up clerk and principal advertising make-up clerk (cap of 1) and in the Facilities department janitors and assistant head janitor (no cap), mail persons (cap of 1), assistant chief electricians, electricians and the assistant chief mechanic are eligible (cap of 2).

The company is also making the buyouts available in the Circulation department to customer satisfaction representatives reporting to Ed Reich and customer service representatives reporting to Dave Engelhardt (cap of 1).

Guild members in other titles may apply but it is up to the discretion of the company whether they accept. If you are interested, you may contact the Human Resources department to get a copy of the buyout package.

Members have a choice on how to receive their buyout pay: either as a lump sum or as salary and benefits continuation (for the number of weeks in the separation pay calculation), both minus applicable taxes. The benefit continuation is for health care benefits only (medical, dental and vision), but doesn't include other benefits such as life insurance, 401k contributions, LTD (long term disability insurance), vacation or sick leave. The company also said it will not challenge anyone who applies for unemployment benefits.

The tax consequences are different on each of the two options, but both are governed by the IRS, not the Sun. We strongly urge you to consult with a financial advisor or a tax expert before making any decisions about accepting a buyout offer or volunteering for one.

Generally, members who accept the package will be able to freelance for the company and will be able to work for other Tribune properties after they finish receiving their buyout benefits.

The deadline for applying is Sept. 2 at 3 p.m. and employees who choose to take the buyout will have to leave by Sept. 9.

We realize this is a short time to make such a life-changing decision, especially as we all watch our 401ks plummet with the stock market. But we were unsuccessful in getting the company to budge from their deadline.

We disagree with the haste the company is taking given the economic climate. We expressed to the company our disappointment that they would eliminate jobs when the top ranks at Tribune are getting millions of dollars in bonuses. But we agreed to the terms

because we know some of you may be interested in taking the deal. We'd rather people leave on their own terms than to be forced out the door.

The company said they have not yet decided if they will resort to layoffs if they don't meet their numbers. In our eyes that means the possibility is still there. We feel layoffs would create poor morale throughout the company. People who are laid off also wouldn't be able to maintain their current health benefits and would instead have to access them through COBRA.

If the company were to resort to layoffs because the caps aren't met, Ann Barnes said the classifications included in the buyout package would not necessarily be targeted for layoffs. "In some instances we thought there may be interest in a buyout and these people might think 'This is my lucky day,'" she said about how they came up with the classifications.

The Guild asked the company for additional improvements including three more months of severance for employees who have been with the company 29 years or more. We also asked to extend the amount of time employees had to make a decision on accepting the buyout.

The company would not budge.

We also asked for a minimum severance of six months with health care benefits. That way people who haven't been here long and were considering volunteering would have more incentive. The company declined that request.

We know that the buyouts will further decimate an employee base that is already overworked. We have told the company our concerns. But it is on us to be more diligent than ever in filing for overtime and making sure that those of us that stay behind aren't forced to pay the price of fewer employees with unfair workloads.

As many of you think about your decision over the coming days, please feel free to come to us with questions. We are here to serve you and get the best deal we can.

Andrea K. Walker, News co-vice chair
Meredith Cohn, News co-vice chair
Gus Sentementes, News mobilizer
Curtis Hale, Building vice-chair
Dave Wright, Advertising mobilizer
Sheila Cole-Washington, Circulation steward
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