RF Central Office contract talks enter 2nd round

By ELLEN BALLEISEN

Employees of the Central Office of the CUNY Research Foundation (RF) voted in late March and April to authorize a bargaining team to undertake a ratification vote in February. On May 21, 2006, the new contract was signed.

The PSC has represented RF Central Office workers for many years. The current contract was signed in 2003.

The new downtown PSC office space before construction began.

The new downtown PSC office space after construction began.

More space for less money

By CHRISTINA INSOGLIA

The PSC will move its office downtown this summer, and construction in the new space is already underway.

The old office will close on a Friday, probably in July, and the new office will be open for business the following Monday. The exact date of the move will not be chosen until construction is closer to completion. "The goal is to be fully functional for the Fall, 2006 semester," PSC Executive Director Deborah Bell told the February Delegate Assembly.

The new space will be more member-friendly than the union's current office in midtown – which has become increasingly crowded as the PSC's membership has grown by half. "If you volunteer or work at the office, you know we are piled on top of each other," said PSC Treasurer John Hyland. "There are evenings when we have three or four committee meetings going on at same time, and people end up stuck into corners, finding space wherever they can."

CONFERENCE ROOM

At present, grievance counselors often meet with members in the lunchroom because it is the best location available. In the new office downtown, grievance counselors will continue to share a common workspace – but they will also have a small private conference room. "Members and grievance counselors won't have to worry about being distracted by phones ringing or other people walking around," said Patricia Rudden, grievance counselor for Hunter College. "Privacy is always important for the grievant, and having a separate meeting room will make members feel more comfortable."

The reception area, offices of PSC staff, and two other conference rooms will be on the building's 15th floor, along with offices of the Welfare Fund. On the floor above, the union will have a room big enough to hold more than 100 people. This can be used for Delegate Assemblies, conferences, Labor Goes to the Movies and other large events. "We are reviving the old tradition of the union hall – a place for members to come together," said PSC President Barbara Bowen.

MORE ROOM

"This large room will have a movable partition that can divide the space in half for committee meetings or smaller union functions. With the two main conference rooms on the 15th floor and the ability to subdivide the 16th floor, the union's office space shortage should be a thing of the past."

By moving downtown, the PSC will be getting more while paying somewhat less. Even after the costs of the move are taken into account, it would have been more expensive for the PSC to remain in its current building on West 43rd Street. "Rents in lower Manhattan are lower than rents in midtown," noted Hyland. "In addition, our new landlord was willing to pay up to $65 per square foot to renovate the new space – a total of $1.6 million. There are also some tax incentives for moving to that area."

"The final design for the new offices is relatively straightforward," said Bell. "To keep construction costs down, we kept it simple. But there are some architectural features that will make the new space interesting and provide access to plentiful natural light."

More members of the bargaining team were told by the RF that if we did not agree to increase employees' share of health insurance premiums, then the RF would reduce the benefits provided," said Debra Bergen, PSC Director of Contract Administration. The expiring contract gave management the power to change the terms of benefit programs without negotiation.

TOP PRIORITY

In response, members said that maintaining current health benefits was one of their highest priorities, even if there was an additional cost. Under the prior contract, RF Central Office employees pay 11% of the employer's health insurance premium cost. After three months of negotiations, management presented what it said was its "last, best, offer," under which employees would pay 14% of the premium in the first year and 17% in the second year.

Based on member reaction in late December, the local union chapter's bargaining team was willing to take the proposal to a vote of the membership. But an incident right before the New Year's holiday swung opinion against management's offer. In late December, paycheck stubs were distributed for the first payroll period of 2006 – and employees were shocked to find that management had illegally implemented the increase in employee health care contributions, before a membership vote on the contract had even begun. The RF did not, however, implement the pay raise – so instead of a net increase, members saved their pay decline.

"The members went ballistic, and so did the union," said Bergen. "Barbara Bowen got on the phone the same day with [RF President] Richard Rothbard and told him this was an unfair labor practice and had to be corrected immediately. You can't implement a contract, in whole or in part, before it's been ratified." Rothbard agreed it was improper, she said, and management moved quickly to correct the error, and members were paid back within a day. While the deductions were reversed, the error put a spotlight on the size of the premium contribution increase. "Once members saw the actual dollar amount that it was going to be in the future," said PSC Chapter Chair Anthony Dixon, "they decided the package wasn't a fair package to them." It was defeated by a vote of 30 to 20.

After discussions with members, the chapter's bargaining team circulated a petition to management that focused on two key issues. In the contract's first year, it asked for a larger pay increase. "Everyone understands that the cost of benefits is rising, and we are prepared to pay more," said Dixon. "But we want management to understand that the cost of benefits isn't the only rising cost of living in New York City."

For the second year, the petition asked RF management to withdraw its demand that employees' share of the health premium rise to 17%, because this would be 17% of "an unknown quantity." "Members are concerned about the second-year health care increase because the premium for that year hasn't been set," explained Antoinette Morizio, the chapter's vice chair. The petition was signed by 88% of the bargaining unit. "It showed that we are united," said Dixon. "If management was thinking that there's a division among the members, the petition made perfectly clear that that's not the case."

PAYING MORE FOR HEALTH INSURANCE

Members of the RF's 'best offer'