

GUILD LEADER

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Leadership urges 'yes' vote on contract *Despite sick-leave concessions, agreement is one of the best in the industry*

The Guild's Executive Committee has voted 10 to 1 to recommend that members approve the tentative agreement for a new 3-year contract with The Journal. Treasurer Greg Smith, who objected to the lack of a specific wage increase in the third year, cast the dissenting vote. A secret-ballot ratification vote will be held Jan. 9.

"We believe this is a good contract," said Guild President John Hill. "It maintains our current health benefits, which are superior to those at many other newspapers. It provides acceptable wage increases, upgrades the salaries of numerous employees, improves the advertising sales incentive program and fairly addresses the introduction of new technologies in the newsroom.

"We're proud that our negotiating committee achieved this agreement during one of the most stressful periods in the history of newspapers."

The Executive Committee had a hard time swallowing two bitter pills in the contract: the reduction in short-term disability benefits, and the lack of a minimum wage increase in the third year, when the company will pay the Guild members whatever it pays to the Teamsters and the Pressmen's unions. But a majority agreed that the gains in the contract proposal outweigh the losses – and that these issues, while

troubling, were not serious enough to jeopardize the entire agreement.

"It's the best contract we can get," said Hill. "More than that, it's the one of the best contracts in the newspaper industry today."

The Providence contract agreement comes at a time when other Guild locals are facing wage freezes and cuts, and changes in their health coverage. At the Boston Globe, wages go up only if the company makes more money. At the Boston Herald, workers pay 80 percent of health insurance premiums and recently gave up previously negotiated wage increases. Members of the Philadelphia Guild get no wage increase at all in the first two years of their contract and agreed to a reduction of sick leave pay to 65 percent of salary. Workers at The Pittsburgh Post Gazette saw a 7 percent wage cut. At the San Jose Mercury News, employees' share of health premiums increased to 30 percent and jobs were eliminated.

The Providence Guild's new contract proposal would maintain health insurance and retirement benefits at their current level, including that employees pay 15 percent of their health insurance premiums. (Belo employees

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Important Dates:

Jan. 9, 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. Voting at Guild office

Jan. 9, Noon -- Informational meeting on proposed contract

Both events will be at the Guild's Providence office, 270 Westminster St., 2nd Floor

CONTRACT

outside the Journal pay 25 percent.) It provides for wage increases of 3 percent in 2008, a minimum of 2 percent or as much as received by the other Journal unions in 2009, and whatever is received by other unions (with no minimum) in 2010. However, there can be no reductions in wage rates.

The contract also would upgrade the pay grades of 31 employees, provide \$500 bonuses to editorial assistants in sports, introduce a \$50-a-month cell phone allowance for those who must use their phones for company business, increase the auto allowance from \$40 to \$50 for the first 150 miles, clarify work assignments in the pre-publishing department, and guarantee that advertising sales goals will be provided to employees within 10 business days of the start of any measurement period. Audio and video technology would be introduced in a two-year trial; training would be provided, no Guild member would be obliged to try the new technology, and no Guild member would be penalized for failing to master it.

The agreement also maintains little-noticed aspects of the contract that have kept the Guild strong, including language that makes layoffs difficult, a requirement that the company deduct dues from paychecks, and an “evergreen” provision that keeps the contract in force if a new agreement is not reached before the current contract expires.

But, under the new agreement, people who go out on short-term disability (up to 26 weeks) would get only 70 percent of their pay instead of the current 100 percent. An exception was made for those recovering from childbirth, who will get 100 percent for six or eight weeks, depending on the method of delivery. Long-term disability and other leaves of absence would also be capped at one year rather than two, and employees with less than six months of service would not be eligible for short-term disability.

The Guild negotiators sought to trade these concessions in disability benefits for increases in casual sick days or the ability to carry over sick days from one year to the next. But the company, which adamantly wanted to control sick leave costs, took a hard line on the sick-leave issue. The company agreed to the childbirth exception, but

said that any further changes in its short-term disability proposal would come at the expense of other medical benefits.

That did not sound like a good option. Reducing short-term disability from 100 percent to 70 percent takes \$150,000 away from our members annually. But if health insurance co-pays went up to 25 percent, Guild members would lose \$350,000 per year. Each 1 percent increase in pay puts \$200,000 in Guild members’ pockets each year.

The failure to establish a wage minimum for the third year also concerned several Executive Committee members, who feared that it would start a precedent in which the company sets wages instead of negotiating them, potentially weakening the union. But in the last contract period the company paid more than the negotiated minimum. Also, having higher wages in the beginning of the contract benefits members because the increases accumulate over the years.

Four years ago, the Guild leadership advised members to reject a company’s contract offer because it contained provisions that endangered the union’s future and because we believed we could get a better deal. Members stood strong against heavy lobbying by company officials, and rejected that contract by a substantial majority. A few months later we did indeed get a better deal, a truly good contract for our members.

Virtually all the key provisions of that contract remains intact under the new agreement. Among the aspects that have changed, the positives outweigh the negatives. The Executive Committee believes we have a good deal now, and urges members to vote “yes.”

Voting will take place on Wednesday, Jan. 9, at the Guild office, 270 Westminster St., from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. There will be an informational meeting at noon. Absentee ballots may be requested and must be returned prior to 7 p.m. on Jan. 9. To obtain an absentee ballot, e-mail the Guild at png@riguild.org or call 421-9466.

For more contract details, read the tentative agreement at:

<http://www.riguild.org/ProJo%20Tent%20Agreement%2012-21-07.pdf>