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Easthampton schools union protests second year without contract

By CATHERINE BAUM
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EASTHAMPTON - Nearly 100 members of the Easthampton Education Association protested starting the school year without a new employment contract for the second year in a row before Thursday evening's School Committee meeting.

Most wearing black and some holding signs, members chanted "Let's be fair, give us health care. No blind 5. No blind 5"; "What do we want? Contract. When do we want it? Now"; and "Two, four, six eight, we're willing to negotiate."

"I just wish we were able to spend our time teaching instead of getting our contracts settled," said Paul Peelle, a high school math teacher who was circling the White Brook Middle School entrance with protesters.

The EEA, representing teachers, paraprofessionals, custodians and secretaries, began negotiations with the School Committee and Mayor Michael A. Tautznik in March 2007, with the one-year contract expiring in June 2007.

On June 17, the EEA, by a margin of 9 to 1, rejected the proposed contract for 2008 to 2011, and subsequently filed for state mediation. A state mediator met with the two sides in mid-August, with another mediation session scheduled for Sept. 9.

"We need to be heard," Robert Parent, EEA president for 10 years, said in a telephone interview before Thursday's meeting. "We need to inform the School Committee as to exactly why we're in the position that we are and why we're deadlocked."

Members of the EEA wore "No Blind 5" badges to the meeting, and intend to wear them again when school resumes next week, according to Parent. The badges refer to language in the previously proposed contract that allows the mayor and School Committee to impose, without bargaining, unspecified changes that seek to reduce costs by up to 5 percent in the health insurance plans that cover EEA members and other city employees, AnneMarie Kelley, of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, wrote in a press release.

The EEA has asked the committee and the mayor what the 5 percent figure meant, whether an increased deductible or higher copay, but, according to Parent, no clear answer was given.

"We know that health care is a very contentious issue - we understand everybody's dealing with it, but what we're having to deal with is not similar to other towns and cities," Parent said in the interview.

Patricia Youmell, president of the secretaries association of EEA, added, "We have tried and we've come up against a stone wall. We're letting the public know because sometimes they don't really get to hear the whole story."

Parent, who was dressed in black - pants, socks, shoes and shirt - said the EEA offered to increase health insurance premium contributions by 5 percent. "This alone is monumental," he told the School Committee Thursday.



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Salary increases and working conditions in the proposed contract were not an issue, according to Parent and School Committee labor relations consultant and negotiator James Connors.

"The offer we made we think is a very reasonable proposal for a three-year contract," Connors said in an interview following the EEA's rejection of the proposed contract in June.

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