

Protestors demand wage increase, contracts

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by Neal Ross

State employees at the Sonoma Developmental Center today will join with mental-health workers statewide in an "informational picket" they hope will call attention to salary inequities between themselves and elected officials, including Gov. Pete Wilson.

"The governor's not negotiating in good faith or keeping his word," said California Association of Psychiatric Technicians vice president Janice O'Neill. "He got a 26 percent raise, and we got nothing -- our last raise was over three years ago."

Co-sponsored by CAPT and the California State Employee's Association, the protest -- which will also include members of at least three other state worker unions -- is scheduled for 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at SDC's Arnold Drive entrance, with most protestors expected around noon.

O'Neill said that since workers would be picketing on their lunch hour, it would be difficult to predict the event's turnout. But local CSEA regional director Jackie Swanton said her union represents some 83,000 state employees in Sonoma County, and she expects a strong showing from workers and politicians alike.

"Although we're sharing him with Napa State Hospital, (gubernatorial hopeful) Gray Davis may be there," Swanton said, adding that

Assemblywoman Virginia Strom-Martin and Seventh Assembly District candidate John Latimer are scheduled to appear at today's rally. "We're hoping Valerie Brown will be there too."

"It's an accumulation of angry people," said Swanton. "but we're trying to do the right thing."

Swanton said smaller protests have been held throughout the state every Wednesday, as workers have worn red clothing "as a badge of angry silence, to say we aren't going to take it any more and we're standing together."

CAPT spokesman Keith Hearn said state employees have been working without a contract since July 1995, adding that although California's inflation rate has increased 10 percent since January 1995, Gov. Wilson has only offered workers a three percent pay raise -- but has himself accepted a total salary increase of 41 percent over the past year.

Governor Wilson was unavailable for comment by presstime, but a spokesman had sharp words for state workers.

"Did your protestor friends tell you that the governor offered them a pay raise last year and this year, but the unions are withholding?" said deputy chief of staff Sean Walsh. "The union bosses are not sitting down at the table."

Walsh added that the governor's most recent salary increase, which was awarded by the California Citizens Compensation Commission, will only be effective for Wilson's last three weeks in office. The commission has slated a hearing this Thursday in Sacramento to hear public comment regarding the raises.

Today's demonstration will also underscore union opposition to state ballot proposition 226, which would require an employee's or union member's permission to withhold wages or union dues for political contributions. Walsh characterized union leaders as being "out of step with their membership."

"It's a pretty sad testament that the labor bosses are so frightened that their workers won't support them, that they have to fight this legislation," Walsh said.

But O'Neill disagreed, saying that while the governor has said that state workers should have a voice, Proposition 226 would take away that voice.

"He needs to recognize the valuable services we perform for the citizens of this state, instead of climbing over our backs for political gain," O'Neill said. "We want the public to know that we're not goofing off here -- we're really working."