

YSU

Panel will look into YSU strikes

By: Bill Rodgers
NEWS EDITOR

The university will reflect on the negotiations and strikes of the faculty and staff unions for the benefit of future negotiations.

Youngstown State University President David Sweet said yesterday that a panel to investigate the negotiations leading up to the respective strikes of the Ohio Education Association and Association of Classified Employees unions would be formed.

Sweet said the panel would be a small group of individuals, some from inside the university, others external to the university. The panel would be

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charged with making recommendations for YSU to use in future negotiations.

"It will show what we can learn from the negotiations what actions may be applied in future negotiations," Sweet said.

Sweet said that a more formal announcement would be made in a week to 10 days after groundwork for the panel was complete

Reflecting

The Jambar recently asked union presidents, negotiators and administrators for their perspectives on the negotiations and resulting strikes. They were asked why they thought negotiations came to a strike, what could have been done differently and what they learned as negotiations finally came to a close.

Vice President For Administration John Habat said that a combination of budget and economic concerns caused tension on both sides of the negotiations.

Habat said the university was functioning in "a climate of uncertainty" in regards to what it was able to offer the unions. Habat cited declining state support, decreased enrollment and the rising cost of health care as factors that restricted the university's spending.

Habat said that the negotiations became difficult when it came to issues such as health care. The unions weren't required to pay into health care in previous contracts.

"One of the biggest issues was asking the unions to take part in health care copays. Understandably, people don't like to take a step backward," Habat said.

Julia Gergits, president of the YSU-OEA union said that her bargaining unit began negotiating fairly early and made good progress on non-economic issues, a point which Tom Maraffa, who negotiated for the university administration, echoed.

"Before teams focused on economics, we did a good job addressing non-economic issues. We made some constructive changes to the faculty's contract," Maraffa said.

Gergits said that progress slowed down when faculty negotiations reached economic issues.

"We reached an impasse where neither side was willing to give ground," Gergits said.

Christine Domhoff, president of the ACE union, said that she felt negotiations began far too late for her bargaining unit.

"We needed to start much earlier. We didn't start until after June. Since our contract expired in August, that didn't leave us with much time to meet and discuss a new agreement," Domhoff said.

Domhoff said a request for an earlier starting date

was turned down by the university.

Sweet said that the start date for the negotiations weren't a factor.

"My impression - verified by the federal mediator - was that we would not settle the agreements until the last minute," President Sweet said in regards to negotiations finishing before the fall semester. "It was part of the challenge we faced."

Gergits said she recommends bargaining teams gather facts more quickly so negotiations over economics can progress faster.

With those interviewed, there were questions raised about trust and respect between the employees and the campus administration.

Gergits said that in the future, she wished her union would work more closely with the other unions on campus, especially the ACE union whose contract expires around the same time as the faculty's.

Gergits said that both sides of the negotiating table needed trust to work better with one another during negotiations.

"We need trust. The trust needs to be better on both sides. We need to believe what both sides are saying," Gergits said.

Habat said that when it came to economics, he wished there was a way to develop an understanding of the university's budget process and restrictions with negotiating groups.

Habat said he heard the university doesn't respect employees in the five years he's been at YSU and the respect needs to go both ways.

"I've heard it about past administrations and I'm hearing the same about this one. I suppose it's a theme that keeps playing out. Another side to that: Is there an appreciation for managing a complex institution in a period of fiscal decline?" Habat said.

Habat said understanding the motives and needs of each side would help maintain positive working relationships at YSU.

"Through a shared understanding of each other's perspectives, we will have a greater ability to work constructively and positively," Habat said.

Sweet said that the strikes showed the university's need for each group on campus. Without each bargaining unit, Sweet said the university wouldn't be able to function.

"One thing the strikes illustrated was how important component parts were to the operation of the whole. Clearly that was a lesson of the strikes," Sweet said.