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Wolcott Paras Negotiate Significant Raises, Retain Defined Benefit Pension

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Wolcott, CT

The members of Sub-local 84 of UE Local 222 - the paraprofessionals, library and security aides in the Wolcott public schools - have a new four-year labor agreement with significant wage increase, and which retains their defined benefit pension plan. The negotiated settlement comes at the end of a long, hard battle which included a trip to binding arbitration.

The old contract expired June 30, 2011, and wages were a major issue in negotiations. Wages rate for this bargaining unit had been significantly lower than those of other groups of paraprofessionals in Local 222. While only a few of the most senior paras had medical insurance through the employer, the workers had a defined benefit pension that provided 50 percent of their annual earnings at the time of retirement after 20 years service, with no employee contribution.

But from the beginning of negotiations the Board of Education (BOE) insisted that the new contract must end the defined benefit pension for new hires, and that due to the state of the economy, the employer would not be providing wage increases that alleviate the wage inequity that these employees suffer.

Since other bargaining groups in the Wolcott schools had already conceded the defined benefit pension, the UE bargaining committee did not have high hopes of retaining the pension for all current and future workers. If they were unlikely to keep the pension, the committee was prepared to fight for medical insurance for all.

The BOE arrogantly tried to restrict what union committee bargain over, saying "the union has too many proposals, pick your top five issues," while refusing to consider maintaining the pension, expanding medical coverage, or addressing the wage disparity. This angered the union committee and membership. After several bargaining sessions in which no progress was made, and after a mediator also failed to move the parties closer to agreement, the union decided there was little to lose by going into binding arbitration.

At the first scheduled day of the arbitration hearing, November 27, UE International Representative **Gene Elk** made a detailed presentation on the unfair difference in wages between the Wolcott paras and those in other Connecticut towns. By the end of that first day of the hearing, BOE representatives were showing a new willingness to find a negotiated settlement

with the union. Late that evening the parties reached a tentative agreement. The agreement, later approved by the membership, maintains the pension for all members keeps the health insurance, for those who have it, with no changes. The contract also provides more than 6 percent in wage increases. These include a \$250 signing bonus, and six wage increases of 2 percent each, effective July 1, 2012; January 1, 2013; July 1, 2013; January 1, 2014; July 1, 2014; and January 1, 2015. The agreement will expire June 30, 2015.

Chris Fitzpatrick, president of Sub-local 84, was pleased with the outcome. "This union worked so hard for us! We never thought we would be able to keep our pension, and the larger than average wage increases will begin to address the disparity in our members' wages."

The UE negotiating committee consisted of President Chris Fitzpatrick, Vice President **Kathy Dibona**, members **Carol Gugliotti**, **Barbara Semerarro**, and **Nancy Cuifalo**. They were assisted by International Rep. Gene Elk, and Field Organizers **Annie MacDonald** and **Colleen Ezzo**, UE Research Director **Karl Zimmerman**, and Associate Counsel **Margot Nikitas**.

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One Gateway Center, Suite 1400, Pittsburgh PA 15222 | (412) 471 8919 | ue@ueunion.org
