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# Deal would roll back new worker pensions, raise pay

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The Board of Supervisors and two of Kern County's public safety unions are poised to end a more than 1 1/2-year contract stalemate with compromise that reduces pension benefits for new workers but also ends supervisors' hard-line opposition to new raises.

Under the tentative deals, which must be ratified by union members, all county sheriff's deputies and firefighters would also contribute t health care and retirement.

Currently, all firefighters and new deputies pay at least a small amount into retirement. Deputies hired prior to 2006 pay nothing int retirement.

Thursday's news broke one year -- almost to the day -- after county supervisors declared an impasse in their talks with fire and sheriff unions.

County officials and supervisors would not comment on the deal since negotiations haven't been completed.

But Supervisor Zack Scrivner did say his goals in negotiation remain the same -- to reduce pension benefits for new public safety employee and have all workers make payroll contributions to health and pension costs.

"I'm hopeful that we're going to be able to come to some sort of agreement," he said.

Marc Haiungs, president of the Kern Law Enforcement Association, said supervisors tentatively approved a deal drafted by a contra mediator on Tuesday and, on Wednesday night, the union board approved the deal and recommended that members -- mostly Kern Count sheriff's deputies -- ratify it.

He said he believes a recent fact-finder report that supported the union's side went a long way to moving supervisors toward compromis Supervisors have flatly rejected any pay raise for workers since June 2010 while pressing for lower pension formulas for new workers an retirement and health care contributions from older employees who don't currently pay in.

"It was not a huge victory by any means for KLEA. But it was better than what we were looking at if they imposed (the county's propose contract) on us," he said.

The tentative agreement would cover the three years following its signing.

Terms were outlined Thursday morning on the KLEA Facebook page:

After the contract is signed, KLEA workers who don't currently contribute to health care costs would begin paying 20 percent of the medical premiums. Also, new employees would begin earning a pension under the 2 percent at 50 formula -- the ability to retire at age 5 with a pension equal to 2 percent of final salary for each year of employment.

Workers would be able to earn up to a 2.7 percent pension each year if they stay employed until age 55.

The current 3 percent at 50 formula, approved retroactively for all sworn safety officers in 2000 without additional funding, has frustrate the public and been a target of attacks by politicians.

In the second year of the proposed contract, KLEA members would get a 2 percent raise, a concession from the county that supervisors ha adamantly opposed all through contract negotiations.

But more senior union members, who do not currently make payroll contributions to their retirement investments, would begin paying percent of their base pay into retirement, offsetting costs the county currently picks up.

In the third year, the union would be able to re-open salary negotiations with the county, but senior union members would begi contributing an additional 2 percent from their pay into retirement.

Supervisors launched their battle with all 14 of the county's unions in June 2010, after passing a budget that assumed unions would quickl concede to county demands for a 12 percent contribution to retirement, 20 percent contribution to retirement premiums and -- for safet employees -- a return to the 2 at 50 formula.

Supervisors warned that If unions didn't concede, they would lay off workers and slash programs to save $15.3 million.

Unions didn't concede.

But a windfall of cash at the end of the fiscal year prevented the promised program cuts.

Since then, the unions and county have been battling over the contracts, wading through fact finding reviews and mediation hearings, whil the county's financial situation stabilized.

Nine months into negotiations -- on Feb. 15, 2011 -- supervisors declared impasse with firefighters, deputies and the union for sheriff detention deputies.

All three unions had made offers to supervisors, at that point, that included contributions to health premiums and retirement from a union members. And the Kern County Fire Fighters union had offered to have new employees start on the 2-at-50 pension system.

Derek Robinson, president of the Kern County Fire Fighters union, said that his union is also close to a similar deal with the county.

"We're still working on a tentative agreement that is similar to what KLEA is sending out to its membership," Robinson said.

But Chuck Waide of the Service Employees' International Union, Local 521, the union that represents the largest number of count employees, said it has not been approached by the county about changing the current stalemate.

"We've had no contact with the County Administrative Office," Waide said.

Other unions, however, may also be in discussions.

"I know they have made contact with other unions other than KLEA and the fire fighters," Waide said.