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Santa Cruz County's contract with largest union expires

Story by PK Hattis • 17h • 4 min read



More than 120 workers with SEIU 521, representing about 1,800 employees with Santa Cruz County, rallied at the Board of Supervisors meeting earlier this month amid a months-long negotiation over a new contract. As of Thursday negotiations remained ongoing though a union representative told the Sentinel that early steps to legally authorizing a strike had already begun. (PK Hattis - Santa Cruz Sentinel)

SANTA CRUZ — A contract between Santa Cruz County and its largest employee union expired at midnight Wednesday and though there is still some roadway left for a renewal, the threat of a strike continues to hover over the ongoing negotiations.

After months of negotiations, county administrators and SEIU Local 521 — representing about 1,800 county employees — failed to agree on a new contract before the current one expired and while the terms of the contract allow for a temporary extension amid the gridlock, a union negotiation representative told the Sentinel Thursday that its members remain steady in their "strike-ready" stance.

Earlier this month, more than 120 card-carrying union members rallied at the county Board of Supervisors meeting to demand that county negotiators put forward what the union views as a fairer contract. Rally goers spoke during the meeting's public comment period for nearly an hour, with many employees, primarily from the Health Services Agency and Human Services Department, sharing stories of chronic staffing issues and inadequate pay for a county that tops the national charts when it comes to unaffordable rental prices.

"There's a chance that the union can pull this off and get a contract that supports services, that supports this community and that builds and maintains its health and workforce," Max Olkowski-Laetz, SEIU 521 Santa Cruz chapter president and bargaining team member, told the Sentinel Thursday. "But also, we're going to have to be ready to fight for that and that might mean striking and that might mean striking at a moment's notice."

For the union to strike, the negotiation team would need to call for and receive a vote of approval from its members. Olkowski-Laetz wouldn't say if that vote had been put out yet to its members, but gestured toward that potentiality saying, "the very first steps to legally authorizing a strike are already rolling and the timeline after that moves very quickly."

The 1,800 county employees with SEIU 521 represent almost two-thirds of the total county workforce, which is close to 2,800 full-time positions, though Hoppin noted that not all of those roles are currently filled.

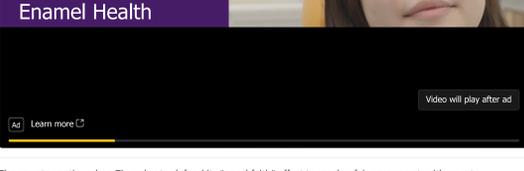
The county continued on Thursday to defend its "good faith" effort to reach a fair agreement, with county spokesperson Jason Hoppin telling the Sentinel the county's latest offer "is generous and on par with the kinds of deals we've seen in comparable counties."

"We do believe that this is something both sides can live with," he added.

From a financial standpoint, the county has been reeling from the impacts of multiple disasters in recent years combined with slow reimbursements from federal entities. Earlier this month, Hoppin stressed that these chronic budgetary issues, combined with the fact that Santa Cruz does not have the same economic engine as some nearby counties such as Santa Clara, means it can't afford some of the contract concessions its neighbors might offer.

According to a negotiations update page on the county's website, a contract proposed by the county Sept. 16 was for three years and included an annual 4% cost of living salary increase the first two years and 3% the final year. But the cost-of-living provisions — an intensely negotiated component of the contract — remained unresolved Thursday, among other things according to Hoppin.

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And as it has been doing for weeks, Hoppin said the county continues to canvass its departments in case a strike does manifest. "We are preparing for that possibility, one that we hope does not come to fruition."

If a strike does occur, Hoppin said the county was promised some notice by the union and that departments that may be impacted include planning, permitting, nonemergency health services and vital records. He underscored that any public safety services — such as 911 responders — and the elections department will not be impacted and that in the wake of a strike, the county would likely ask a Santa Cruz County Superior Court judge to designate workers in certain departments as "essential" to ensure services for vulnerable populations go on uninterrupted.

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Asked what some of the remaining sticking points are, Olkowski-Laetz pointed to recent reports from the Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury that found chronic staffing issues in the county's behavioral health division and that hiring was urgently needed to address behavioral health challenges in the community. The current contract on the table, he said, doesn't measure up to the size of that need.

"This community deserves a comprehensive investment in county services and what those county services look like is a workforce that carries the work out," said Miranda Schirmer, a senior social worker with the county family and children's services division. "We need to be able to continue to do our job and we can't do that if the county doesn't invest."

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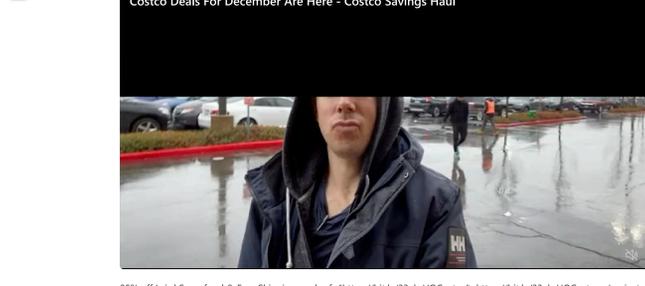
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Legendary roadside restaurant Pea Soup Andersen's sold to new owner

18h • 3 min read



The sign on the roof of Andersen's Split Pea Soup Restaurant. © Provided by KSBW Monterey-Salinas

After months of uncertainty following its sudden closure, Pea Soup Andersen's, the legendary Central Coast destination in Buellton just off Highway 101, appears to have new ownership.

And with it may come controversy.

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According to Santa Barbara County records, confirmed to SFGATE by a clerk in the assessor's office Tuesday, Pea Soup Andersen's restaurant and lounge, as well as the adjoining parking lot, was purchased May 31 by a company called SBID LLC c/o Ed St. George, for \$4.95 million.

A Buellton Planning Commission report from 2023 confirms that Ed St. George manages SBID. Its address of 831 Cliff Drive, Suite 100, Santa Barbara, is also associated with St. George and Associates, a known mega-renter to college students in Santa Barbara and Isla Vista. St. George and Associates does such robust business with college-age renters that the website's homepage even has a parent and child.

But St. George is also a polarizing and well-known figure in Santa Barbara County. Local news outlet Noozhawk

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