

Los Angeles Times

Deal to boost security guards' pay

By Ashraf Khalil, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer, January 21, 2008

Union set to vote on landmark contract that increases wages and benefits 40% for workers in L.A.

Union officials representing thousands of private security guards in Los Angeles have struck a landmark deal with several property management companies that provide security to 80% of the commercial real estate in Los Angeles County.

The deal results in a 40% increase in overall salary and benefits, according to Faith Culbreath, local head of the security officers' branch of the Service Employees International Union.

"We're very excited," Culbreath said. "We've achieved all our core objectives."

Culbreath declined to discuss specifics of the agreement pending a Jan. 26 ratification vote before the approximately 4,000 local union members.

Another union official, who was speaking on condition of anonymity, called it "the best contract of its kind in the country."

The agreement concludes seven months of negotiations that culminated in a 24-hour final bargaining session that ended early Saturday morning, Culbreath said. It was to be announced today by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who has championed the security guards' cause for years and whose aides were deeply involved in the negotiations, Culbreath said.

"Today we have a historic agreement that directly improves the lives of more than 4,000 hardworking Angelenos, and whose impact will be seen in families throughout South Los Angeles," Villaraigosa said Sunday in a statement.

"This agreement has been six years in the making, and I could not be prouder that we were able to help make it happen."

The contract is a major victory for the SEIU, which has campaigned nationwide for years to unionize private guards. The union came to local and national prominence in 2000 after organizing the weeks-long Justice for Janitors strike against the same property management companies. The strike resulted in a 25% wage increase over three years, and is regarded as a turning point in the local labor movement.

The union won the right to organize guards at properties owned by one of the region's most influential developers, Robert F. Maguire, in 2006. That pact helped launch a broader campaign to unionize security guards.

In the current negotiations, the union sought to bring the guards' hourly pay and benefits in line with those of janitors represented by the SEIU. Currently, janitors working in the same buildings and for the same management companies make up to \$6 per hour more than guards -- who average around \$8.50 per hour with no health insurance, paid vacation or other benefits, Culbreath said.

In November, the union accused the property management companies of bad-faith negotiations. Union members held rallies outside the offices of some of the companies and unanimously voted to authorize a strike, if necessary.

Those actions, combined with a three-day strike by security guards in San Francisco in early fall were "the turning point in our campaign," Culbreath said. "The building owners knew we meant business then."

The private security industry has mushroomed in recent years, particularly after 9/11. Culbreath and other union officials estimate that there are 1 million private security guards nationwide -- double the number of police officers.

About 55,000 guards nationwide are currently represented by the SEIU, and union officials hope to use the Los Angeles agreement as a national template. Similar negotiations are ongoing in Minneapolis and Seattle.

Culbreath said she hopes to more than double the local union's membership to 10,000 by the end of this year.

Up to 70% of local private security jobs are filled by black men, and Culbreath said the new deal would bring an estimated \$50 million more per year in wages and benefits, "the vast majority of that going into the black community."