

M, G Star Tribune Nov.
10, 2007

U regents approve contract that ended workers' strike

• A union-management committee will seek to address issues related to the walkout by clerical, technical and health care staffers, but unhappiness over the deal remains.

By JEFF SHELMAN
jshelman@startribune.com

After two strikes in the past four years — including a two-week labor stoppage at the beginning of this school year — the University of Minnesota is trying to mend fractured relations with its unionized clerical, technical and health care workers.

On Friday, the university's Board of Regents approved the contract agreement that ended the September walkout. University President Robert Bruininks said that a union-management committee has been formed to address issues between the two sides.

"I'm optimistic we can work together and bring everyone together to heal the university community," Bruininks said. "I think the strike was unnecessary. We should have stayed at the table and worked really hard to resolve these issues."

"I think it was a breakdown that was inexcusable. I think we should all work together to make sure we resolve our differences without strikes [and] the divisiveness that comes with it."

Many workers represented by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) remain disappointed with the contract's annual salary increases of 2.25 percent for clerical and technical workers and 2.5 percent for health care workers.

"This settlement is inadequate," AFSCME officials said in a statement. "It does not ac-

« I THINK THE STRIKE WAS UNNECESSARY. ... IT WAS A BREAKDOWN THAT WAS INEXCUSABLE. »

U President Robert Bruininks

count for the ever rising cost of food, gas and housing.

"The university has paid and will continue to play a high price for [its] anti-worker conduct and [its] arrogance."

One issue Bruininks would like to see the new committee tackle is whether future contracts should be longer than the current two-year cycle.

"It is very expensive and very divisive" to negotiate every two years, Bruininks said. "And I think it's difficult for employees to be on this two-year roller coaster. I think we could have longer contracts."

After the regents' meeting, Bruininks addressed two other matters:

- The contract of men's basketball coach Tubby Smith. Bruininks said he wasn't concerned that Smith will coach his first regular-season game today without having signed an employment contract. The former University of Kentucky coach was hired more than seven months ago, but a full agreement still has not been reached.

"They're working on the final stages, and I don't anticipate any problems getting it signed," Bruininks said. "There are no serious issues on the table."

- Tuition increases. Bruininks said that he is hope-

ful that increases for the 2008-09 school year will be kept between 4 and 4.5 percent.

"If the state steps back and says, what will it take to keep the University of Minnesota on that moderate [tuition increase] path, it is not that daunting," he said. "It's something the state can afford."

Jeff Shelman • 612-673-7478

