

Burlington School Workers Earn New Contracts

By John Briggs

Published May 7, 2008 in The Burlington Free Press

Burlington School District food service and maintenance workers are celebrating new contracts that will phase in a livable wage over four years.

The 46 food service workers, most of them women, will get pay increases of 3.2 percent this year, 13.3 percent next year, 20 percent the third year and 11.3 percent in the fourth year of the contract. Starting pay for food service workers will rise to \$15.23 per hour by the end of the contract. The contract is retroactive to July 1.

The maintenance workers' contract, also retroactive to July 1, calls for pay raises averaging 4.3 percent over the four years for the 50 workers, rising to a starting pay of \$14.15 by the end of the contract.

The school district's four bus drivers, who have been paid a livable wage, will see a pay increase of slightly more than 3 percent over the four years. The pay raises will add about \$545,000 to the district's expenses over the four years, according to figures provided by Superintendent Jeanne Collins.

"It's a huge move," said George Lovell, state coordinator for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. The workers are represented by AFSCME Local 1343.

School Board Chairman Thomas Fleury said that phasing in the pay raises over the four years would allow the school district "to be responsible to our employees and to the taxpayers, as well."

"There are a lot of happy people," said Sue Thompson, a food service worker at Edmunds Elementary and Middle School for 17 years. "We're happy with the agreement. It's definitely better than what we had."

Thompson is typical of many of the food service workers in that she must work two jobs to support herself, said Colin Robinson, who directs the Vermont Livable Wage Campaign at the Peace and Justice Center.



Burlington schools food service workers (from right) Sue Thompson and Barbara Cushing, and shop steward Sandy McAuliffe celebrate Tuesday as Burlington School District and union leaders announce contracts for bus drivers and property and food services workers that phase in a livable wage over four years. EMILY J. NELSON, Free Press

Thompson said she works from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. at her food service job during the 180 days a year school is in session. Two evenings a week and Saturdays she works from 5 to 10 p.m. at Merola's Market on North Avenue. During the summer, she manages the city-owned North Beach snack bar.

The Burlington Livable City Coalition, made up of residents, unions and other organizations, said in a prepared statement that the livable wage campaign, now 3 1/2 years old, is "also about gender wage inequity." The contract for the food service workers, the news release said, means "the inequity is finally being corrected within the Burlington school district and sets a standard for our community."

James Haslam, director of the Vermont Workers' Center, part of the Livable City Coalition, said the coalition's long-term goal is to have all Burlington employers pay a livable wage. "The School District and the city have been leaders," he said, "but it doesn't end here."

The livable wage is the amount needed by an individual or family to pay for basic needs such as shelter, food and clothing, plus taxes. The state's Joint Fiscal Office issues an update on the cost of basic needs and the livable wage every two years. The livable wage is not the same as the minimum wage, which is federally mandated and sets the lowest hourly rate an employee can be paid.

The new school district contracts don't provide for health insurance for the food service workers. Lovell said that benefit will be a focus of future contract negotiations.

Sandy McAuliffe, a food service worker in the school for 30 years, the AFSCME Local 1343 shop steward and a member of the union negotiating team, said that under the new contract the workers will be paid for school holidays during the school year. Previously, she said, they got a fraction of their normal daily pay.

"I think we pretty much came out with something good," she said.