Health care on the table

In the midst of a worsening economy, health care negotiations begin this summer between the University and the nine MSU unions covered by the Joint Memorandum of Understanding.

Our current contract, which ties increases in the cost of health care to wages, expires at the end of 2009. In order to be ready for the 2010 Benefits Open Enrollment in the spring, a new agreement needs to be completed and ratified sometime around the end of the year.

This is a crucial point in time to be facing contract talks, and the unions, working through the Coalition of Labor Organizations at MSU (CLO), are preparing to defend the interests of the approximately 5,000 support staff employees. The unions have chosen the individuals who will represent them in negotiations, and the executive boards of all the covered unions will meet together in August to discuss our shared agenda and goals.

CTUs are wondering what to expect in this year’s upcoming health care negotiations. We have asked CLO President Wayne Cass, who will serve as the CLO’s chief spokesperson during bargaining, to address some of the inquiries.

Question: In this economic climate, with the cost of health care rising, shouldn’t we expect to have to shoulder our “fair share” of the burden by giving up some benefits or paying more for them?

Benefits continued on p. 6

Custodial cuts = more CT work

In an effort to save money, the University has eliminated 19 custodial positions as well as the monthly interior cleaning of offices. These cuts affect the jobs and work of MSU employees who are members of AFSCME 1585.

“While this is not a preferred outcome,” it is necessary in an attempt to balance the budget,” according to CTU President Deb Bittner.

CTU expands into Grand Rapids

CTU, along with the APA and APSA unions, is following the expansion of the MSU College of Human Medicine into Grand Rapids. As of August 18, we will welcome into our union 10 new members who work in the academic area of the College.

The CTU and the University signed an agreement in June setting forth the terms of the arrangement, which includes language on bumping and bypasses. Until March 31, 2011, CTs from the East Lansing and Grand Rapids areas cannot bump anyone from the other location. However, laid off CTs will be given the option to bypass into vacant positions in the other location. Subsequent contract negotiations will determine how layoff, bypass and bumping procedures are handled after this date.

The agreement covers only the Grand Rapids workers and does not extend to other MSU employees working in areas outside of our contractual jurisdiction. [Julie Marie Rorick]

“The distance to Grand Rapids poses both challenges and opportunities,” said CTU President Deb Bittner.

In this electronic age, communications should not be a problem and elections can be done by mail, but we will need to work out ways for our new members to participate in union activities. Also, we may be travelling to Grand Rapids somewhat regularly.

The Union will meet with the new members later this month to answer any questions or concerns and to communicate the rights and responsibilities of membership.

Expansion continued on p. 8
CT News

Clerical-Technical Union
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Editorial Policy: The CT News is the voice of our union. It is our vehicle for communicating, on a regular basis, the issues that confront us as workers. Through this newsletter we explain union policies, show how dues are spent, and explain the views and actions of the elected leadership for evaluation by the members. The CT News is the voice of the membership. We welcome articles from members and stories about members.

While contributions are welcome they should be constructive and contribute positively to the welfare of our union. We will accept no attacks on any union leader or member. We will accept thoughtful discussion of all related issues in the letters section, and reserve the right to reply to those that seem to reflect a misunderstanding of the union and its policies.

Direct ideas, letters, questions and comments to Cheryllie Finney.

CTU Classifieds

For sale:
◆ New Dell laptop computer: XPS M1330, Intel Core 2 Duo T8300 2.4 ghz processor, 2gb ram 2 dimms, 128 mb Nvidia Video, 160 Gb hard drive, Windows Vista Business Edition, 8x DVD/RW, 9 cell battery, 3 yr complete care, fingerprint reader and Dell express card remote control. Comes with a padded case and the following loaded programs: Adobe Photoshop elements 6, Adobe Premiere Elements 4, Roxio Creator DE 10.1. $1,500 or best offer. Call Nora Carr at 517-420-4308.
◆ Barn 30 x 60 for tear down: Wood for projects, rustic use, trusses, $500 B/O, metal roof reserved, or make offer.
◆ Antiqueman upright piano w/bench: Needs work $50, will deliver for fee.
◆ American Racer flat track tires: New (2) 225 / 60 D 15.
◆ Coronet: Holton Collegiate, needs repair (have Marshall Music estimate), w/new soft instrument case, music book(s) $25.

CT News is the voice of the membership. We welcome articles from members and stories about members. Please call 586-489-8199.

◆ Book repair and binding: Do you have a favorite book that needs repair or even rebinding? All types of rebinding available, specializing in both old and newer books. Call Nora Carr, fellow CT, for a quote. 517-420-4308.

Executive Board Meetings
1st & 3rd Tuesdays at 5:15
CTU Office
All members welcome.
The good news and the bad news

By Deb Bittner

When you hear, “I have good news and bad news. Which do you want first?” it can be hard to choose. I like the bad news first so I can end on the good, kind of like eating dessert after a meal (although it’s a rule I’ve been known to ignore since becoming an adult).

So, I’ll start with the bad news. Here it is, the end of July. The summer is half over but it doesn’t feel like we have even had summer weather yet (which may be good news since we haven’t had that much humidity?). School plans already are gearing up for fall, and the back-to-school ads are on TV.

Even with a few bright spots, Michigan continues its economic decline.

To its credit, MSU has been preparing for the worst, year after year, so we haven’t experienced the same shock that recent cutbacks have caused some other institutions. However, our resources are stretched thin. During a time of cutbacks, the administration is in the unenviable position of balancing the needs of all the components of the University: students, structural facilities, employees, outreach, etc.

Layoffs have slowed and most of those affected have found other jobs, although we did lose some probationary members. Remember to call the CTU if you hear rumors of layoffs or job cuts, if you receive a notice that you may be laid off or are laid off, or just have questions about job cuts or added responsibilities due to budget cuts.

Workers all over campus are being asked to do more with less. This newsletter features an article on the loss of custodial jobs and how our own duties might be impacted. Union members, even if we belong to different unions, need to support each other. The article offers some suggestions on what to do if you are asked/told to do the work of AFSCME 1585.

This issue also includes a Q and A section with CLO President Wayne Cass on health care and the next round of health care negotiations, which start this month. We already meet with the University monthly as part of our partnership agreement to work on keeping health care costs down, but now we will meet more often as we together develop a new agreement. This is both good news and bad news. While we work on the same side as management in keeping costs down and have developed a great deal of mutual respect, we must now negotiate a new agreement in a bad economic climate with lots of pressures being applied from outside our campus grounds.

There are also some good things happening! We have acquired new CTs in Grand Rapids. The contract becomes effective for them on August 18. We are getting a 2.75% raise next April. Good work everyone for being smart health care consumers. Your hard work paid off! We are filling our UR vacancies as CTs step forward to serve their coworkers. If you are interested, see the details in that section of the newsletter.

Other campus news: The MSU Kresge Art Museum is celebrating its 50th anniversary and the 10th year of the Twilight in the Garden fundraiser. Again this year, CTU is honored to be participating in this event by providing volunteers, especially since it is a special anniversary year for us too!

Speaking of volunteers, we need members to coordinate the CTU elections in October. Give me a call at 355-1903 if you are interested or want to discuss what it entails. [Robert Kildee]

More involvement by CTs in the work of our union is always good news. We will be calling on you to be involved with many activities this year, so please make sure we have your correct home and email addresses. We need to make sure communications reach all members in a timely manner, especially information about the annual election.

To end on good news, we have lots going on and CTU can always count on its members to assist with the challenges. And the Autumnal Equinox really isn’t until September 22. Get going on enjoying your summer days, weather friendly or not!
Leadership duties

The terms of our president, treasurer, three directors and an Audit Committee member will be up this October.

To help us decide who to support, or whether or not to run, it’s important to know the duties of the position.

The duties of officers on the Executive Board are laid out in Article V of the Constitution (www.msu.edu/user/ctumsu/ctu.htm or call the office at 355-1903 if you don’t have internet access).

In order to fulfill those duties, elected officials are expected to take on many responsibilities. Those expectations, along with the duties of Audit Committee members, are detailed on this page.

President

The President of the CTU is expected to fulfill all of the responsibilities listed for Directors and officers. In order to fulfill the Constitutionally mandated responsibilities of the Office, the President also is expected to:
• keep the Executive Board and organization on track between meetings;
• structure Board meetings;
• provide a long-range view of the organization;
• act as official spokesperson for the CTU, internally and externally;
• remind people of deadlines;
• balance a 40-hour week through the use of flex and comp time, and report to the Board if work demands overload status;
• report activities to the Board and members;
• use full-time released time from MSU position;
• chair Executive Board meetings and negotiations, and sit as ex officio member on all internal committees;
• supervise staff;
• chair Personnel Committee and report personnel issues to the Board for decision-making;
• vote only to break a tie in an Executive Board vote.

Treasurer

The Treasurer of the CTU is expected to fulfill all of the responsibilities listed for Directors and officers. In order to fulfill the Constitutionally mandated responsibilities of the Office, the Treasurer also is expected to:
• oversee fiduciary responsibilities, pay bills, cooperate with auditor, research community solicitations, report on the financial impact of decisions;
• chair the Finance Committee;
• prepare the budget with the Finance Committee;
• make quarterly reports to the membership;
• use 25% released time from MSU position in order to fulfill duties.

Audit Committee

This description of the Audit Committee and the duties of its members is taken from Article VI of the Constitution:
• The Audit Committee shall consist of three members. They shall be elected for staggered three-year terms with said election held at the same time and under the same rules as apply to the Executive Board. Members of the Audit Committee may not be members of the Executive Board.
• The Audit Committee shall make or cause to be made at least a yearly audit of the Union’s finances and shall report to the membership the result of such audit.
• The Audit Committee shall monitor normal operating expenses and shall serve as an independent communications channel between the members of the Union and the custodians of the Contingency Fund for verification of withdrawals from that fund.

Directors and officers

In order to fulfill the Constitutionally mandated responsibilities of any position on the CTU Executive Board, those elected are expected to:
• carry out and honor the oath of office;
• commit the time required to serve the Union including some day, evening or weekend hours;
• support unionism;
• uphold the Union mission and direction as set by the Executive Board and the CTU Constitution;
• make decisions and create policy;
• use input/data from membership, experts, and staff when time permits;
• serve on either the Grievance, Appeals and Trials or Finance Committee;
• represent the CTU at all times;
• attend some labor functions as a CTU representative;
• attend Board meetings, UR meetings, regular and special membership meetings (attendance mandatory);
• when possible, work in conjunction with URs on membership issues;
• keep URs informed and in the loop;
• be able to work as part of a group of people;
• honor issues of confidentiality;
• control rumors/misperceptions.
the June 26 memo from Fred Poston, Vice President of Finance and Operations and Treasurer to Vice Presidents, Direct Reports, Deans, Directors, and Chairs.

Jim Rhodes, President of AFSCME Local 1585, said that 1585 members still are available to clean offices. However, departments and units will need to pay for the services. Rhodes urged departments to continue using the services of 1585 members on a regular or as-needed basis by calling the Physical Plant directly at 353-1760.

He also asked workers of other unions to refrain from taking on the duties of 1585 members.

What does this mean for CTs?

While we don’t have any reports as yet, during past cutbacks in custodial services, CTs have been directed to carry their trash to outside trash bins, regularly mop or vacuum their own floors or pick up other work belonging to the custodians.

Budgets are tight, and everyone is cutting back. However, it is important that we not take on duties that belong to the employees of another bargaining unit.

“When we pick up these extra duties, we tell the University that we don’t need the employees of AFSCME local 1585,” said CTU President Deb Bittner.

She said it is like faculty saying they will schedule their own rooms and do their own typing so it’s ok to lay off CTs.

“Not only does this undermine solidarity at a time when it is most needed,” Bittner added, “but most of us already are under additional stress as a result of cutbacks. Taking on duties that belong to another union’s members increases our own work loads and stress levels and may well contribute to putting someone out of a job.”

(If you are assigned too much work, refer to the “Work Overflow Form” at www.msu.edu/user/ctumsu/overflow.htm.)

“We understand that the economy is bad, but management needs to realize that we cannot do the same amount of work—or more—with fewer employees,” she added.
Almost two decades ago, the MSU unions recognized the impact health care costs were having on the University budget including the ability to keep employee compensation at a pace with inflation. While other employers focused on shifting health care costs to employees, we began working with the University to decrease the overall amount MSU spends on health care. However, this wasn’t done without sacrifice, and MSU employees have contributed a fair share toward paying the health care cost in the process. We have accepted direct cost shifting when doing so would steer people to using more cost effective products and services. We’ve implemented many benefit design changes to lower the overall spend without causing people to forego necessary care, and we’ve recognized the economic relationship between health care and employee compensation in other tangible and measurable ways.

Although different, our innovative approach has driven cost down, and MSU employees have avoided a great deal of the major cost shifts many other workers have experienced. By taking “ownership” of the problem and investing into a process by setting our own priorities of what to sacrifice, we have been able to maintain a health care benefit that provides quality, affordability, access and choice. But it hasn’t come without a cost.

Are the unions going to keep working together on health care negotiations? [Marcia K. Pung]

Absolutely. We all understand access to affordable, quality health care is a common need. Union leaders understand unless or until something changes in the fundamental structure of the system, employee consumer access to the market is only possible by working in partnership with the employer as purchaser. Union leaders also understand the importance of having all employee consumer interests represented in that partnership.

Union leaders also know no one organization has all the resources and answers to the challenges we all face. Only by bringing all of the resources labor has to the table will we be able to assure we’re doing everything possible to represent the wide range of needs and concerns of the employee consumer population represented at MSU.

As a group, we are engaged with University staff benefits in ways that wouldn’t be possible individually. Because of our collective knowledge, we are better prepared to engage the challenges we face individually. Union leadership understands how dependent we are on one another to represent our individual members’ interests.

Will wages be tied to the cost of health care in the next agreement?

The concept of the matrix that ties our wages to increases in the cost of health care goes back to your first question about employees paying a fair share of health care cost.

First, let’s remember that in the U.S. employer sponsored health care structure, all wages, including those negotiated in union contracts, are tied to health care costs. As health care costs skyrocket, consumer employees pay either in direct payments to health care providers and insurers and/or they pay with stagnant or decreased wages. MSU employees are no different.

The real question, I think, is: Will how you approach this reality do anything to address the problem or will it make things worse in the long term?

MSU’s approach, whereby we openly acknowledge that wages are directly tied to health care cost by creating a matrix that assigns a measurable, mutually agreed value to that tie, has been important. Not only does it address the economic pressures for employees to share the burden represented by our health care problem, but along with other important labor/management efforts, does it in a way that attempts to address the real long-term problems by keeping the interests of the employer/purchaser and employee/consumer aligned. [Judith Easterbrook]

It’s really important we understand this, so please bear with me a minute.

Paying one’s “fair share” of health care costs typically is defined as direct premium sharing (either by percent of cost or a fixed dollar amount) or “co-insurance” (which usually means some combination of premium sharing, point of service fees, deductibles and co-payments—where the health plan will only pay some percent of delivered services).

These approaches are simple and easy to understand and implement. They are effective in reducing the employer cost, at least temporarily, but they aren’t effective at impacting the actual cost of health care and, therefore (more importantly) what it will cost in the future.

Benefits continued from p. 1

Benefits continued on next page
In fact, there is ample evidence now to show they are counterproductive in controlling cost.

Studies now back up what we argued over fifteen years ago: Rather than making employees aware of the cost of health care and, therefore, able to become better consumers, the direct health care insurance premium sharing approach alone can create the attitude of “I’m going to get the most use of what I pay for” and actually contribute to increased utilization and cost.

Likewise, there is an abundance of evidence that shows when the cost is shifted using the co-insurance approach, you will reach a tipping point when people start making health care consumer decisions based on their pocket books rather than health needs. When people delay needed care until their condition is serious, they don’t live well (which effects productivity), and treating serious health issues costs a lot more, which drives cost up, too.

Personally, I think it’s clear this policy has failed. Virtually every employer in the country has used this approach for at least 20 years. It not only didn’t bring costs down, along with many other health care related issues the country hasn’t addressed, it contributed to increased cost over time. Here, in Michigan, we don’t have to look very far to see what the impact of this failed 20-year policy is having on workers’ wages today.

When MSU committed to bringing together the interests of employer and employee and working in partnership as purchaser and consumer, labor and management recognized that maintaining a sustainable health care benefit would require addressing the real long-term problems in a completely different way.

Do you want to quit smoking, but aren’t sure you can? Maybe you’ve tried before but have experienced varying degrees of success. Don’t give up. MSU’s Health4U can help you quit.

An orientation for the next cycle of the MSU Smoking Cessation Project is scheduled for Wednesday, September 16, 2009. This fifteen-month program combines use of the prescription Chantix with medical evaluation and monitoring as well as a structured behavioral support system. This program has already helped many MSU employees quit smoking, including several who struggled with nicotine addiction for years.

Faculty, academic and support staff and their adult benefits-eligible spouses or partners are eligible to participate. To learn more, contact Health4U at 517-353-2596 or Health4U@msu.edu.

The MSU Smoking Cessation Program is sponsored by the Office of the University Physician-Health4U Program, MSU Human Resources and Olin Health Center-Pharmacy Service.

Want to quit?

Tying wages and health care directly in a matrix has been important, but it is only one component of a much broader comprehensive labor/management approach that has had significant success in addressing a serious problem.

Whether or not a matrix will continue as a component of a future agreement is difficult to answer. Union leaders know that even though occupational classifications started off at different levels, job markets shift over time and having a University-wide wage growth standard for eight years is an issue that has to be addressed.

We know quite a bit about our health care benefits and are having some success finding ways to reduce costs. But, there’s a lot we don’t know right now. With all the activity in Washington and at the State level we really can’t know all of the conditions we will face in the next months so it’s hard to know if a wage matrix will be a necessary component in continuing to make a joint purchaser/consumer partnership sustainable and successful.

What happens if the unions and the University are unable to reach an agreement in time for the spring 2010 open enrollment period?

If the unions do not come to agreement with the University together, the current health care benefits will continue and each union will address these issues separately during the 2010 contract negotiation cycle.

How will we get information about the progress of negotiations?

MSU represented employees will receive updates from their unions and from meetings and publications issued by the Coalition as we proceed with contract talks. Any questions and concerns can be addressed to your union leaders as well as to the Coalition at the various meetings we will schedule on campus later in the year.
“As MSU expands to meet the requirements of a ‘world class university,’” Bittner said, “CTU’s move into Grand Rapids shows that we are willing and able to represent CTs wherever they might be.” [Renee Cowdrey]

The CTU also has submitted a letter to the University requesting formal recognition of our representation of CTs at MSU’s College of Osteopathic Medicine satellite locations in southeast Michigan.