

WP firefighters picket city hall over contract

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WINTER PARK—Carrying signs with slogans such as "Fire fighters still make housecalls," "Quality begins and ends with me," members of Winter Park's fire fighters' union picketed in front of City Hall Monday to protest a contract imposed on them by the city commission last week.

Motorists and onlookers showed support for the picketers by giving a thumbs-up sign or honking their horns as they passed, and firefighters from the neighboring departments in Orange County, Orlando and Reedy Creek joined in the march periodically throughout the day.

In the meantime, business went on as usual inside City Hall.

"They certainly had the right to picket as long as they didn't impede or interfere with traffic or business here," said assistant city manager and personnel director John Litton, "I commend them for handling themselves responsibly in the manner that they did."

Union spokesman Pat McCabe said he and the other firefighters were pleased with the outcome of the demonstration.

"The main purpose of the picket was to bring ourselves more into the public eye; to bring to the public's attention how unhappy we are with the way the city is treating us," McCabe said Tuesday. "I think we accomplished that very effectively yesterday."

The picket came as the culmination of months of negotiations in which the city administration and the union have been unable to reach an agreement on a contract. After the union declared an impasse on the negotiations in June, a third-party representative from the state Public Employees Relations Commission stepped in to arbitrate, and when he was unable to continue, the city commission was appointed to vote on the contract.

As a result of the city commission's vote, McCabe and fellow firefighter Brian Dean resigned from the Winter Park Fire Department. McCabe will take a position with the Orange County Fire Department, and Dean said he will return to school to study another line of work.

The union has not yet voted on the imposed contract because it has not received a complete copy, said McCabe, but he added that he is 100 percent sure the union will reject it. If so, the imposed contract will remain in place until Sept. 30, when it will go back to the bargaining table for renegotiation.

Key points upon which the city and the union have disagreed are the management rights clause, the pay scale and compensation for overtime and emergency medical technician

certification.

The city's management rights clause gives it the right to take disciplinary action including discharge without first having to show just cause.

The union's clause states the city would have to show just cause for its disciplinary action.

Also, the union is requesting a 35-cent per hour incentive raise for emergency medical technicians' (EMTs'), overtime pay, and compensation for firefighters who temporarily fill upgraded positions. The city is unwilling to grant those requests.

McCabe called the imposed contract, while not a surprise to him, "a slap in the face from the city" nonetheless.

"The city has been unwilling to compromise from the beginning," said McCabe. "I don't think they ever took the time to really look into the issues. They just didn't seem to care."

Flyers being distributed by the picketers Monday blasted the city administration for its "many years of inequitable pay, heavy handed personnel policies and unwillingness to discuss these matters with its personnel."

"...In the past several years we have seen almost one-half of the department personnel leave due to the stubborn and antiquated management practices of the city administration," the flyer stated.

McCabe said his decision to leave was based on that reason and the feeling that "I've been lied to one too many times, and I just couldn't work with this city government anymore."



Firemen, working under a contract imposed by the city, protested in front of City Hall early this week. (Ray Lucas photo)



Winter Park firefighters picket to get public attention for their side in the contract negotiations with the city. (Ray Lucas photo)