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Teachers go on strike; no classes Tuesday at Bellingham Technical College

BY SAMANTHA WOHLFEIL

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BELLINGHAM — Bellingham Technical College instructors went on strike Tuesday morning, Sept. 24, forcing the cancelation of classes on what was scheduled to be the first day of the fall term.

Negotiations between representatives of BTC and the faculty union, the Bellingham Education Association, had continued late Monday night, but without an agreement the strike was on. BTC planned to notify students by email on the status of classes Tuesday. A statement from the college said there would be no classes during the strike. Negotiations resume Tuesday.

Faculty members voted Thursday, Sept. 19, to strike if the school failed to offer a "fair contract settlement by the scheduled start of school Tuesday, Sept. 24," according to the union.

Union members have picketed at various times and plan another picket Tuesday. Mediators from the Washington State Public Employment Relations Commission assisted over the weekend, but the sides still could not agree on terms by Monday.

The faculty has been negotiating with the school for almost a year, according to union liaison Tony Kuphaldt, an instructor at BTC.

"We're looking at three major issues: compensation, language defining work load, and protection in our contract against surveillance as employees," Kuphaldt said.

The union was asking for a three-year contract with across-the-board faculty salary raises of 3 percent in the first year, 2.5 percent in the second year, and an undefined raise during the third year for faculty stipends, Kuphaldt said.

The faculty at BTC has not received pay increases since 2008, Kuphaldt said. Neither have they received pay cuts, something a BTC press release said the school was able to avoid in 2012 and 2013 during a time when employees at other colleges and state agencies took 3 percent salary cuts.

Faculty members also wanted the school to clarify contract language regarding work load, Kuphaldt said.

"Our contract defines hours of contact time, but it doesn't talk about non-instructional duties, like how much we're paid for non-contact duties or other extra duties," he said.

The third matter at hand, preventing employee surveillance, stems from a recommendation made by a third-party higher education consulting group during a spring 2013 conference, Kuphaldt said. The conference focused on student retention and making sure students don't fall through the cracks. Consulting firm Noel-Levitz recommended the school use a third party to evaluate teachers and employees by posing as students and collecting data, similar to the way a secret shopper system works, Kuphaldt said.

"We found this rather shocking, since we already have systems in place to evaluate teachers and faculty on performance," Kuphaldt said. "To go to this step really was like a breach of trust."

BTC's latest proposal, as of Monday afternoon, was for a three-year contract with various salary and stipend increases. The cost to the college in the first year would be \$133,801, with additional costs in the next two years, according to BTC spokeswoman Marni Saling Mayer.

The college's proposal also seeks to address many of the other issues raised by the faculty and includes altering various policies to meet that.

A BTC statement said, in contrast, the latest demands from the faculty union would cost the college in excess of \$287,000 the first year, more than double BTC's offer.

The administration posted its latest offer [here](#) (PDF).

BTC faculty and classified staff receive above-average wages compared to others in the state community and technical college system, according to a school release.

"BTC is committed to working through contract issues to avoid (the strike)," BTC President Patricia McKeown wrote in an email to faculty, staff, and students Monday morning. "We deeply value our employees and are determined to do our best for them."



Striking Bellingham Technical College instructors picket outside the Whatcom County Courthouse Tuesday morning, Sept. 24, 2013, while school administrators seek an injunction in Whatcom Superior Court against the strikers to force them to go back to work. PHILIP A. DWYER — THE BELLINGHAM HERALD | [Buy Photo](#)

