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Seeking labor peace in Costa Mesa

There's a great deal of bargaining room between employee sick days and City Council health benefits.

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My motive as a negotiator was pure, and my efforts honest. But after meeting with elected officials last week, I was unable to deliver any measure of labor peace in Costa Mesa, where half the city's employees have been notified they could soon be fired and replaced by private contractors. Advertisement

Luckily, the court stepped in where journalism failed, and employees got a temporary reprieve Tuesday when an Orange County Superior Court judge ordered a postponement of the layoffs until a lawsuit is heard. Still, it's a scary time to be a public employee in Costa Mesa, which an Orange County GOP boss described as ground zero in the war on union pension costs.

It's not that Costa Mesa officials, led by Councilman Jim Righeimer, don't have a point when they say current policies are unsustainable. But they decided the best tool for the job was a sledgehammer. Instead of starting a constructive conversation, they've made a mess.

That's why I decided to head for Orange

County again on Thursday night. I'd been critical of the approach taken by Righeimer and Councilman Steve Mensinger, so we decided to hash out our differences over a beer at Skosh Monahan's, a saloon owned by their political compatriot, Mayor Gary Monahan.

Almost immediately, Righeimer made what I thought was a fair point.

City employees get a lot of pay for time they don't work, with employee vacations that range from two weeks to five, along with 11 paid holidays and a personal day.

At a time when a lousy economy has meant tight government budgets and shrinking public services, Righeimer wondered, isn't that too much?

Even more irksome to Righeimer is Costa Mesa's sick day policy. If you're sick for up to 12 days in a year, you're paid for not working, which is fine.

But if you're not sick, you can carry those days over and cash them in after 20 years or upon retirement at half value. So let's say you work 20 years and never take a sick day off, that means you've got 240 sick days accumulated, and you can cash them in for 120 days of pay.

Why should you get sick pay, Righeimer wonders, if you weren't sick?

But the bigger problem, as Righeimer sees it, is that city employees, particularly police and firefighters, can retire way too young at too high a percentage of their salary, without contributing enough to that cost. That's why city officials expect pension costs to go from 15% of the total budget to 25% in a few years.

I told Righeimer that before visiting him I had spoken to Nick Berardino of the Orange County Employees Assn., which represents non-public safety employees in Costa Mesa. Berardino had told me that many aspects of the existing employee contracts were negotiable and that he's happy to begin the bargaining any time. But first, Righeimer and company have to pull back

the layoff notices.

"They won't do it," Berardino had predicted, "because this isn't about the budget for them. It's about politics." And it's about what Berardino sees as Righeimer's years-long attempt, including two failed statewide initiatives, to crush public employee unions.

Berardino was right. Righeimer told me he doesn't intend to reconsider mass layoffs until he gets bids on the cost of outsourcing the jobs of city employees.

After ending the conversation on that frustrating note, I left Costa Mesa and met up with Berardino at Norm's diner in Santa Ana, where he was as passionate about his cause as Righeimer had been about his. To Berardino, unions have helped keep thousands of people clinging to the middle class at a time when wealth has shifted to a tiny percentage of Americans.

When critics say union members have it too good, Berardino asks them what kind of world they want to live in. Do they want all their goods to come from a place "where they pay people 16 cents an hour?"

Do they want neighbors who make a living wage as public servants, or do they want to see them bumped by minimum wage earners who can't afford a home or health insurance, or even consider college for the kids?

Government budgets are tight, Berardino concedes. That's why Costa Mesa employees have already made concessions and would agree to more if they trusted Righeimer's budget numbers and if he wasn't threatening to take away their livelihoods.

Berardino said he's willing to talk about tinkering with the sick leave policy, limiting paid holidays, increasing employee contributions to pensions, raising the retirement age and even offering hybrid retirement plans that include 401(k) plans.

Maybe he's promising more than he can deliver. But with the temporary injunction against layoffs, Righeimer and his cohorts ought to take Berardino up on his offer to talk it over. If it's the taxpayers Righeimer is concerned about, rather than advancing a political agenda, now would be a good time to prove it.

And another thing:

At the saloon, I asked Righeimer and Mensinger what their own benefits package looks like, since they're so keen on cutting everything. They said they're paid \$904 monthly for their part-time jobs, plus health benefits, and Righeimer said he doesn't take the health coverage.

But the other four council members apparently do, according to the city's website, which said that in addition to taxpayer contributions to their pensions, council members are paid a whopping \$1,595 a month for medical. That's twice what their whipping boys, city employees,

are getting.

Is it time for Costa Mesa to outsource the City Council?

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