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## ADF&G workers to picket

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Some 20 State of Alaska employees in Kodiak are expected to picket Wednesday, spending their lunch hour walking at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game building or in front of state offices at Center Avenue and Mill Bay Road that house the Department of Labor and Alaska legislative information offices.

The employees seek higher wages, premiums for accepting supervisory positions that exclude overtime pay, and less expensive health insurance.

The employees are supervisors, represented by the Alaska Public Employees Association. They are among about 2,000 workers statewide in a bargaining unit called the State Supervisory Unit of APEA. Employees in the group have college and graduate school degrees, usually masters degrees or higher, according to the union.

"None of us are very comfortable with this," Alaska Fish and Game employee Joe Dinnocenzo said of the picket, adding that living in a small town makes the demonstration conspicuous, but employees want to inform the public. Dinnocenzo is an assistant area biologist for Fish and Game's commercial fisheries division.

The union claims supervisory positions are difficult to fill, and employees often lose money accepting the overtime-exempt jobs. APEA is also proposing a union-controlled health insurance trust, should the worker group choose that.

The employee group rejected an offer from the state that included a 4 percent raise for the current fiscal year, and 3 percent raises for the following two years.

The union claims that offer barely keeps wages in line with inflation, while Gov. Sarah Palin and the Department of Administration claim it is the best offer supervisors have received since Walter Hickel was governor.

"One of the things the governor has done is give me marching orders to see these contracts through. And we think they are the best contracts that have been offered in 15 years," Department of Administration Commissioner Annette Kreitzer said.

Ivan Vining, a biometrician and shop steward for the worker group in Kodiak, said there is a shortage of applicants for the state's supervisory jobs, proving the compensation has not kept up with the times.

Job openings that once attracted two dozen applicants now often attract only a handful, Vining said.

"It is not uncommon nowadays to have between three and five (applicants). We had openings in the last year that have had one or two," Vining said.

"We have received compliments from Gov. Palin. She has said she is pleased with how her state workers are performing. Well, if we are doing a good job, then don't you reward that?" Vining asked.

"To not be keeping up with the rate of inflation is almost insulting, but surprising to say the least," he said.

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Promotions often come at a loss of take-home pay, Vining said, because once a state employee becomes a supervisor, they are exempt from overtime. Other factors come into play, such as limiting fieldwork, hazard pay and sea-pay, he said.

The Department of Administration admits every department in the state has some recruiting problems, but they blame an aging work force.

Management positions require a combination of education and experience. As baby boomers retire, the pool of experienced, educated applicants is shrinking.

The Palin administration admits some people take pay cuts when promoted to a supervisory role.

"There are a couple instances where we have seen a negative impact like that. Obviously one is when (a worker becomes) an overtime exempt employee, but federal law determines who is exempt from overtime," Kevin Brooks, deputy commissioner at administration, said.

Brooks said the state makes a hefty contribution to state workers' health insurance.

"The state contributes \$850 per month for every state employee. That is more than \$10,000 a year and that is pretty good health care," he said.

The Palin administration has formed a work group made up of members of the executive branch to discuss retirement and recruitment issues. Announcements about the work group and other press releases from the administration include a message that the governor intends to seek "cost-neutral or low-cost" solutions to the recruitment problem.

That language ruffles the feathers of the employee group, who walk Wednesday with the theme, "respect = fair pay."

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