

## **State Workers Fight to Keep Health Benefits**

### **Local News**

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OLYMPIA, Wash. - It's back to the bargaining table this week for the State of Washington and union representatives, who are negotiating for a contract that will cover more than 100,000 state workers. At issue is who pays, and how much, for health insurance premiums and deductibles. The Washington Federation of State Employees (WFSE) contends the state is one of the largest employers in Washington and should pay its share of health care benefits accordingly. Instead, state negotiators have suggested increasing the percentage that workers pay for their premiums, and doubling their deductibles. WFSE Executive Director Greg Devereaux says it's a common misconception that state employees are getting a sweet deal on benefits.

"Right now, state workers' coverage benefits are significantly below those of the Microsofts, the Fred Meyers, the other large employers in the state." The State of Washington currently pays 88 percent of employees' health insurance premiums, and workers pay the rest. One option the state is suggesting changes the percentages to 80 percent-20 percent and raises deductibles from \$750 per family to \$1,500. Instead, says Devereaux, the state could raise money for keeping employees' insurance affordable by closing tax loopholes. He cites the tax exemption for professional sports stadiums as one example of a drain on the state budget, while state employees have watched their wages and benefits erode. "State employees are saying, 'My workload has increased. My pay has decreased by 5 percent in the furloughs. I took a \$1,100 hit last year in health care benefits - and now you want to tax me further?' State employees are angry. They feel like it's a tax." The state says the budget crisis makes the changes necessary. The next round of negotiations begins Tues., Aug. 24, at 9 a.m., at the Dept. of General Administration in Olympia.