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School aides will fight for health coverage

By Luther Turmelle, North Bureau Chief

WALLINGFORD — Negotiations don't begin for another month and a half, but already the union that represents the school district's 185 paraprofessionals is saying that it is prepared to do whatever it takes to get health insurance coverage for its members.

"If they chose not to negotiate, then we will probably go to arbitration," Annie MacDonald, president of Local 75 of the Paraprofessionals Union, said Wednesday night during an informational meeting at Yalesville Elementary School that attracted 85 union members and about 50 residents.

The paraprofessionals, who work with the district's teachers in classrooms, are the only town employees that don't have health care coverage. The current contract expires at the end of August, and union members who are public employees aren't allowed to strike.

That predicament has forced the paraprofessionals to make some tough health care choices.

For Laura Chuba, it means having a double mastectomy before the end of the school year to avoid a \$1,500 deductible under the limited coverage that her husband has through his small business.

"I don't want to leave my students before the end of the year, but I have to," said Chuba, who is in her 22nd week of chemotherapy. "I'm still paying my current \$1,500 deductible, and the new (health coverage) year starts June 1."

MacDonald said she's concerned that the Board of Education, whose negotiation team is led by attorney Peter Janus, will not seriously consider the union's primary demand.

"The board president (Michael Votto) has an attitude that we are just a union and that the real work is done by the teachers," MacDonald said. "Our problem is not

with the teachers; many of them support us.”

MacDonald said she is troubled by the prospect that Votto, who is a teacher in North Branford, has health care coverage through his job, yet could conceivably vote to deny paraprofessionals the same opportunity.

Votto was not at Wednesday night’s meeting. Only one school board member, Democrat Carol Hayden, attended the paraprofessionals’ gathering and said she supports their efforts to get health care “100 percent.”

“It’s not going to cost the district that much, maybe 1 percent of the total school budget,” Hayden said.

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