

L.A. City Council approves raises of up to 22% for about 9,000 DWP workers

ADVERTISEMENT

Critics are questioning the new union contract for L.A. DWP workers. (June 28, 2017)

By **Dakota Smith and Laura J. Nelson**

JUNE 28, 2017, 7:15 PM

In a big victory for labor, the [Los Angeles City Council](#) on Wednesday approved a contract giving [six raises in five years](#) to members of the Department of Water and Power's biggest union.

The vote came despite objections from some council members over what they considered a rushed process that didn't give them time to scrutinize the deal.

It also is expected to open the door for other labor groups at City Hall to demand generous salary packages at a time when the city is struggling with tight budgets and financial woes.

Although Mayor [Eric Garcetti](#) and other city leaders say the DWP contract will result in better utility services, others fear it will leave the city on the hook for more employee raises as other unions negotiate contracts.

"This puts us in a weak position moving forward," said Councilman Mitch O'Farrell, who voted against the deal.

"I would use this as a starting point for my own union."

In an 11-3 vote, the council backed raises for about 9,000 members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 18. Workers will see raises of at least 13.2% and as much as 22.3% by October 2021, depending on inflation.

City Hall negotiated the raises behind closed doors, and lawmakers skipped the traditional committee meeting that gives the public the opportunity to voice support or opposition for a proposal before the final vote.

The city's fast-track process was criticized at Wednesday's hearing, and three lawmakers who voted against the contract said they wanted more public outreach and more time to learn about the proposal. In addition to O'Farrell, council members [Mike Bonin](#) and David Ryu refused to support the agreement.

Ryu called the contract "reasonable" but said the process moved so quickly that City Hall had not finished analyzing its fiscal impacts.

Several council members said they learned about the proposed contract from media reports.

How real are the 'cost savings' in generous DWP union contract? We run the numbers »

"I don't like to make a decision with a gun at my head," O'Farrell said in an interview after the vote. "I'm just not going to do that. I think we have to stand up sometimes, and say, 'hold on.' Let's get more answers before we make a decision."

The new contract comes after a three-year period in which union members received no raises, followed by a single 2% increase that went into effect last fall.

Utility officials have said the raises were necessary because employees were leaving to join better-paying companies.

Over the last two years, the DWP has invested \$12.5 million in training and salary costs for apprentice lineman, only to see those workers lured away by signing bonuses and more lucrative overtime pay, officials said.

Supporters of the contract say the agreement will end the city's nearly \$4-million annual contribution to two [controversial nonprofits](#) affiliated with the union. The organizations provided six-figure salaries for utility managers and union leaders but never demonstrated much impact on employee training and safety, their two stated goals.

The new contract will also require every union member to undergo yearly performance reviews.

City Councilman Paul Koretz called the deal "a reasonable compromise" during Wednesday's hearing. He pointed to the last DWP contract, which offered no raises for three years.

"To give cost of living increases around 2% is not particularly shocking and is a fair thing to do," Koretz said.

No public speakers showed up to support or oppose the proposed raises at Wednesday's meeting.