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Signer Buick employees picket dealer for more pay, benefits

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FREMONT — Pension contributions, fair wages, and a contract are what 17 union employees of Signer Buick Cadillac want.

Picketing for two hours Thursday afternoon in front of the auto dealership on Balentine Drive, workers said they haven't had a raise or contract since 1996.

And they want more company contribution to the benefit and pension plan.

"It's costing me $3,536 a year to work here" because of contributions to medical benefits, 401K and disability insurance, said Ken Davison, one of the picketing employees. Davison has worked at the company for eight years.

Don Signer, owner of the auto dealership, said that may be true. But, in return, employees are getting a higher wage than workers from most other dealerships.

"They're getting more money and they have a choice to do what they want with it," Signer said.

Experienced technicians make $23.42 an hour. Workers in the parts department make $19.06 an hour.

The technicians, lot attendants and parts department workers have been protesting for 2½ months. This week's demonstration brought out support from about 25 members from the local machinists' union, marching, waving placards and chanting.

Signer and the union will meet April 3 to attempt to iron out a contract. The main sticking point is the pension plan. The workers want it in addition to their 401k because it has a better rate of return.

Rick Payne, who works in the parts department, said Signer should give workers both a pension and 401k plan "to be a nice guy. But if he gave us a choice, 95 percent (would choose) the pension plan. But he says it's 401k or nothing.

"Each person would have to hit 100 percent of the industry average to get a raise and bonus," said Payne, who has been with the company 10 years. "He doesn't want to give us raises."

Signer said in 1994 the union changed the pension to a 401k plan that is run by the national dealership association. The union switched to the pension and then back to the 401k.

Signer said he has made improvements on a four-year contract proposal, which would be effective Apr. 1, 1996.

He said the shop averages a few percentage points less than industry standards and pay raises would be tied to efficiency.

"It seems if there were better opportunity out there they would leave, but no one's left," Signer said. "That's because we have a good program."

Signer said pressure to compete against the big chains such as Grand Auto accounts for the need to keep costs down.

"Every department has to carry its own weight," he said. "They're asking for more than we can afford to pay."