

Fact finders near verdict in civil service dispute

By PHILIP H. DIXON

ALBANY, N. Y. (UPI) — The three members of a special fact-finding board are hammering out their final report on a contract dispute between the state and its largest public employees union, hoping that their report can avert a threatened strike.

The dispute centers on salaries in a reopener clause in the third year of a Civil Service Employees Association contract.

At a raucous meeting three weeks ago, 1,200 CSEA delegates authorized a strike by the CSEA's 147,000 state workers if no settlement is reached by April 29. The original deadline for agreement had been April 1.

"We are going to try to come down with this thing as soon as possible," Maurice C. Benewitz of Manhasset, chairman of the fact-finding panel, said Sunday night.

"We have met together a full day," and conferred by telephone since the last of eight days of hearings ended Thursday night, he said.

"We're drafting now," he said. "We will exchange drafts and meet again if necessary" before presenting recommendations to both sides. Their report becomes public five days after it is presented.

Benewitz said he couldn't set a specific target date for the presentment, but spokesmen for the state and the CSEA said they expected it to come in approximately a week.

The central issue before the fact-finders, appointed by the state's Public Employment Relations Board, is wages.

The CSEA has asked for a 15½ per cent salary increase, with a minimum raise of \$1,395 and a maximum of \$3,100, while the state has offered a one-time bonus of \$250. The state says its offer would cost \$50 million, while the union claims its demands

would cost about \$300 million.

Both sides presented comparisons with private sectors and cost-of-living figures to bolster their positions before the fact-finders.

Other issues before the board, whose other members are John W. McConnell of Ithaca and Jonas Silver of North Merrick, are disciplinary procedures, an agency shop and state health insurance.

A CSEA spokesman said that when the fact-finders' report is presented, members of the CSEA's executive committee, statewide officers and negotiators, about 50 persons in all, will meet to consider whether to recommend acceptance by the membership.

The group will also consider whether to go ahead with a strike if the recommendations are deemed insufficient, the spokesman said.