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Montgomery employees benefitting from a tilted field

By [Editorial Board](#), Published: March 10

MONTGOMERY COUNTY and its public-employee unions have been at each other's throats for quite some time, as a period of austerity displaced an era of fat contracts and swollen annual pay increases. Now, after several years of frozen salaries and furloughs for county workers, County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) has unveiled surprisingly generous agreements and raises with unions representing more than 10,000 public employees and firefighters.

How Mr. Leggett would pay for those raises will become clear when his budget is published Friday. Meanwhile, the County Council should revisit the broader question of Montgomery's labor laws, which have tipped the scales in unions' favor for too long.

The new contracts are welcome news for many county workers. About 6,000 general employees will receive pay increases amounting to 13.5 percent over the next two years. Another 4,000 or so — those who have reached the top of their pay grade — will get raises of almost 6 percent. About 600 county firefighters will do even better: raises of almost 20 percent over the next three years.

The increases certainly outstrip what many private-sector employees receive. The firefighters' contract looks particularly extravagant, given that most firefighters also pad their pay with hefty doses of overtime and are treated to excellent benefits, including retirement after just 20 years of service.

On the other hand, Montgomery workers (excluding teachers) have received no general raises in three years and no cost-of-living increases in four years. That's a deeper sacrifice than many other public employees in the region have made. Most county employees (again excluding teachers) suffered pay cuts through furloughs. In the depths of the recession three years ago, firefighters also forfeited a scheduled increase of 10 percent.

Nonetheless, the generous contracts were impelled by another factor — a legal regime that has consistently favored labor, leaving the county reluctant to press its case in

binding arbitration or the courts. In explaining the level of pay increases, Mr. Leggett specifically cited the risks of not reaching an accommodation with the unions.

Recent history makes his point. Of nearly 30 contract disputes over the past eight years or so, the county has lost all but a handful in arbitration. One reason: The unions may blackball arbitrators whose rulings displease them, refusing to renew their terms.

County Council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville) is considering legislation that would establish a new system for collective bargaining, one more accountable to the public it ultimately is supposed to serve. It would dispense with arbitrators in favor of a five-member panel: three members appointed by the council, one by a union and one by management.

This seems a sensible reform that might help create a less-tilted playing field. The county has an excellent and professional workforce; it deserves to be well-compensated. But taxpayers also have an interest in keeping costs within reason. Mr. Andrews's bill may help achieve that.