Editorial: Students pay for salary increases

When the California State University trustees presented the system's top executives a 4 percent raise Tuesday, professors were among those protesting.

Oddly, a day earlier they staged protests on the 23 campuses statewide, complaining the raise offered them wasn't big enough.

The reason that's odd is that in the first year the proposals are exactly the same: 4 percent, retroactive to July 1 of last year.

Over the four years of the proposed contract, faculty salaries would increase nearly 24 percent, a figure most people working in the private sector would love. The faculty argue there are uncertainties in the contract that could reduce the four-year raise to 14 percent. Again, most people working in the private sector would be pretty happy with that.

But, this isn't the private sector. This is the Oz-like world of government spending, where salaries aren't determined by how much money you have on hand, but rather by how much your neighbors are paying.

"We have to have competitive wages," goes the argument, "to attract and keep the best people."

Maybe, although it could be argued that people who make job choices based solely on salary aren't the "best people." They're just mercenaries. And we'd wager that's not what brought most of the current staff to Chico State University.

There's a lot of blame being assigned in this struggle.

The professors blame the trustees. There's probably some truth there, as the university system doesn't seem to be well managed. Still, managing that system is a lot like herding cats. After all, there are 23,000 faculty members, many of whom apparently don't see any contradiction in arguing that the raise they're being offered is too small, but the same percentage raise given administrators is too big.

The trustees blame the Legislature and the governor. It's hard to argue with that. Sacramento is about as dysfunctional as a place gets.

And the professors deserve a bit of the blame as well. They aren't badly paid. A full professor at Chico State earns $86,107 right now, a figure that would rise to $104,525 in 2009-10 under the proposed contract. Lecturers at the bottom of the teaching hierarchy jump from $43,192 to $53,433.

Pretty good in a county where the per capita income is $25,357.

There's plenty of blame to go around, and only one victim of the squabble: The students. They're the ones paying for it. Another 10 percent fee hike is proposed in Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's budget, the sixth increase since 2000. They'd be the ones to suffer if professors strike, as they've threatened.

And aren't they the ones the university system was created for?