

# From a striking teacher in New Jersey

1 December 1998

Dear readers:

I am a Jersey City schoolteacher. Since November 19, 2,500 teachers and 1,000 support personnel represented by the Jersey City Education Association have been on strike.

We are demanding changes in the district's proposed contract that would amount to improved working conditions, a fair process of teacher evaluation, and a decent pay increase. Additionally, the union is fighting against attempts by the district to undermine the present health benefits package enjoyed by workers and their families.

We have been powerfully unified from day one. Our strike has been 98 percent effective, with just over 50 teachers, aides and secretaries crossing picket lines. In fact, several workers who had previously crossed the line have decided to join the strike. At the same time, the district has been unable to attract even a fraction of the scab substitutes needed to fill our jobs.

The city's five high schools were ordered shut after disturbances by students on November 19 made it impossible for the district to guarantee public safety. Elementary schools are 'operating' on a half-day schedule, with only a handful of scabs and administrators to run each school. It has been estimated that only 30 percent of the district's 33,000 students are attending school, but the actual number appears to be much lower.

For the last nine years, the Jersey City Public Schools have been under the control of the state of New Jersey. None of the state's efforts to 'reform' our system have had any real impact on student test scores, and the corruption and nepotism that previously plagued the district on a local level now exist at the state level. Gradually, the focus has shifted away from the Board of Education and onto the teachers themselves.

This protracted process reached an all-time low last year with the arrival of a new state-appointed superintendent of schools, Dr. Richard DiPatri. Most of

the anger of strikers has been directed at DiPatri, whose surprise school inspections by what teachers call 'SWAT teams' and whose punitive rather than clinical use of the teacher evaluation process have led to widespread despair and low morale among teachers. It is exactly this situation that JCEA President Tom Favia has identified as the key reason for this strike.

Since going out on strike, we have faced court orders demanding our return to work and declaring our strike illegal. Judge Martin Greenberg imposed a \$100,000 a day fine on the JCEA, but stopped short of fining teachers individually, as requested by the district.

Just before a rally of about 3,000 teachers and supporters from throughout the state, we learned that Judge Greenberg signed an order demanding that all strikers return to work Monday morning or else be fired.

Most teachers appear confident that it will be impossible to replace 3,500 school employees in a reasonable amount of time, and that both sides will be compelled to reach an agreement. But what will be the nature of such an agreement? And what is the district's motivation in asking for this latest court order?

I feel it is necessary to place this strike in its proper political perspective. A number of teachers feel that this latest court order could be part of broader scheme to not only break this strike and extract concessions from school employees, but to bust our union and privatize a segment of the public school system.

Our strike has been denounced by the Republican mayor of Jersey City and governor of New Jersey, both of whom support vouchers, charter schools, and privatization. The simple fact is that enemies of tenure and union representation for teachers have long been waiting for an opportunity to take on the teachers union. Senator Alfonse D'Amato made hatred of the union the sole education issue in his campaign platform. While he was defeated by his Democratic challenger, many of his like-minded colleagues remain

in public office and at the sidelines.

Individuals who identified themselves as members of the Christian Coalition were witnessed videotaping our rally. It is a well-known fact that the religious right, which despises the NEA and its local affiliates, has been in the business of producing propaganda films against our union.

And what about Richard DiPatri? Is he simply a stumbling bureaucrat dumped on us by Trenton, as many union officials have suggested, or does he come on a larger mission? Taken in combination with his unreasonable concession demands and insulting salary offers (which amount to less than 3 percent a year), his outright refusal to negotiate in person raises the very real possibility that he does not wish to reach an agreement with our union at all.

If this superintendent and his puppet masters in Trenton (and perhaps even in Washington) have conspired to force a teachers' strike in order to take on and bust our union, teachers must be prepared to take this struggle to a higher level.

The alignment of political forces makes clear that teachers need a political instrument with which to raise their struggle. This is not simply a matter of union militancy. This is a militant and unified strike, but it could still fail.

The absence of any public support from the Democratic Party only serves to underscore the point that teachers in particular, and the working class as a whole, need a political party to fight for their interests.

AR

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See Also:

Jersey City teachers end strike after firing threat  
[1 December 1998]



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