

Jersey City teachers end strike after firing threat

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Jersey City teachers and support personnel voted to accept a three-year contract Sunday, five days after a judge ordered the firing of all striking teachers if they did not return to work by November 30. The teachers union and the state of New Jersey, which oversees the school district, reached a tentative agreement last Wednesday, the day after Judge Martin Greenberg of the Hudson County Superior Court ordered the teachers back to work.

The teachers had previously defied a back-to-work order from the same judge who was fining the Jersey City Education Association (JCEA) \$100,000 a day for the strike.

The Jersey City mayor and the New Jersey governor, both public supporters of vouchers and school privatization, attacked the 2,500 teachers and 1,000 secretaries and teachers' aides who struck November 19. Mayor Bret Schundler immediately urged the teachers to go back to work and called on the Board of Education to hire more substitutes to break the strike. Governor Christine Whitman issued a statement calling on the teachers to end the strike 'immediately,' declaring 'the actions of the JCEA demonstrate contempt for state statutes and a total disregard for the best interests of the children.'

In the face of this the JCEA leadership was incapable of broadening the struggle and rallying the support of other sections of workers, parents and students to fight this political assault, despite the widespread sympathy for the strikers. Instead, under the threat of court order and without any strategy to fight, the union leadership caved in and settled before the Monday deadline.

At the Sunday ratification vote JCEA president Thomas J. Favia called the settlement a great victory. According to union sources, the teachers won a 12.3 percent pay increase over three years, and the support

personnel won an estimated 15 percent over three years. However the wage hike has to be balanced against an extension of the school day. Each school day will be extended 10 minutes in the second year of the contract, and another five minutes in the third year. In addition, a day will be added to the school year.

The most contentious issue of the strike was what the union called the 'negative evaluation system.' This involved State Superintendent Dr. DiPatri's tactic of conducting surprise visits to the classroom, and then supposedly grading the teachers' abilities based upon what the evaluators witnessed. Teachers feel that the performance evaluations are written before the inspectors arrive to scapegoat teachers for the district's poor educational statistics. The state took control of the Jersey City educational system nearly 10 years ago due to poor ratings. Many teachers feel that DiPatri's tactics are designed to promote privatization as the only alternative to 'failing schools.'

The new contract allegedly addresses this issue by allowing teachers to meet with evaluators 20 days before the classroom visit. It also gives teachers a videotaped demonstration of what is expected of them. However, it is not at all clear what will take place at this meeting. One teacher felt that this so-called meeting could be very cursory, and that, in general, there was no new contract language that would stop or even slow down DiPatri's tactics.

According to the union the membership voted 2,229 to 102 to accept the contract. The general sentiment of the membership was that with the threat of being fired, and with no alternative form of struggle being offered, they had little choice but to accept.

See Also:

A letter from a striking teacher in New Jersey
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