Buffalo, New York teachers defy anti-strike law

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Public schools in Buffalo, New York remained closed Friday the day after 3,800 teachers walked out in defiance of state anti-strike laws over the lack of progress in contract negotiations. The Buffalo Teachers Federation (BTF) called a one-day strike Thursday after the school board presented contract proposals almost identical to the regressive demands overwhelmingly rejected by teachers at a mass membership meeting Monday, September 4.

BTF President Philip Rumore instructed his members to return to work Friday morning in compliance with the demands of city and school officials. But School Superintendent Marion Canedo canceled classes, saying the union had not given her sufficient notice of its intentions. Rumore called the superintendent's actions a "setup." Negotiations are continuing over the weekend.

School and city authorities as well as the media denounced the teachers strike—the first since 1976—in the most vitriolic terms. Democratic Mayor Anthony Masiello called the walkout "an unconscionable act" that was "very punitive and damaging to the children and parents." The mayor put city health and safety departments on full alert, implying that they were ready for violence or acts of vandalism by striking teachers. He also said that teachers' pay would be docked for Friday, even though they had offered to return to work.

The media sought to stoke up anti-teacher sentiments. The *Buffalo News* published a prominent article entitled "Parents are angry, feel betrayed," which denounced teachers for forcing low-income parents to scramble for child care. Throughout the day local radio announcers denounced teachers for being greedy, unconcerned about children and working only part of the year. Despite this, even the news media's biased polls showed 50 percent of the city residents supporting the teachers.

Under New York State's Taylor Law, which prohibits strikes by public employees, teachers can be fined one day's pay for every day on strike. The union has hinted that next week it could begin a "rotational strike" involving the picketing of selective schools on various days, pending any resolution of the contract dispute. BTF officials say this tactic would defray the financial impact of the anti-strike law because only individual or small groups of schools would be struck at any one time, thereby limiting the number of strike days a teacher could be fined.

BTF President Rumore was served a court injunction against any job action Wednesday morning, but a judge has refused the school board's request to find Rumore and the BTF in contempt, pending a hearing on Monday.

Before Thursday's walkout teachers had picketed the previous two mornings before the start of the school day, but entered their buildings together. On Labor Day, September 4, thousands of teachers crowded into Kleinhans Music Hall to express their outrage at working a year without a new contract, and they unanimously rejected the latest contract offer from the school board.

About half the membership has waited 10 years to receive any portion of the raises previously awarded by a contract negotiated in 1990-94. New York State has provided $30 million to assist the district in the $73 million settlement that had been delayed in several Court of Appeals cases over the last decade. Other monies are to come from a $25 million bond. The Buffalo School Board has procrastinated in calculating back pay, requesting salary information from the union.

While the media denounces teachers for their legitimate demands for salary and health benefit improvements, little if anything is reported about the

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lack of basic supplies, large class sizes, dilapidated buildings, inadequate numbers of aides, nursing staff and counselors.

Buffalo, an industrial city of 300,000 in western New York, has been devastated by years of plant closings and downsizing by the steel, rubber and auto industries, and has largely missed out on the much-vaunted economic boom in the US. The 47,000-student school district has lost tens of millions of dollars from tax abatements to big business and other revenue cutbacks, and has suffered years of budget-cutting causing severe program cutbacks and layoffs.

The school district's original wage offer of 0 percent, 1 percent, 2 percent, 1.5 percent and 2 percent respectively over five years was changed to 0 percent for 1999-2000 and to 2 percent in each year from 2001 through 2003. The new offer also reduced extra teaching days from two days to one day in 2002, which effectively means a .5 percent pay cut for teachers. Many Buffalo teachers already make as much as $10,000 less than their suburban peers.

The school board is also demanding that retirees pay greater medical deductibles, prescription co-payments and health care costs over the life of the contract. New employees would pay a portion of their medical premium and would not be covered for the first 30 days of employment. There will also be larger co-pays for generic drugs from regular employees.

In addition, vacant positions in art, music or physical education could be filled by outside contractors. These programs, absent for years in the lower grades, could be restored with nonunion employees. In addition the board wants to contract with social agencies outside the district to serve troubled students.

Workers injured on the job would have compensation reduced from five to three years and from three years to one year for other reasons. Early retirement would now require 12 years of service as opposed to 10 years in the previous contract. By 2002 this would increase to 15 years of service. Pay for early retirees would be at 65 percent of former wages, with $10,000 subtracted from salary calculations—as opposed to 75 percent.

Teachers have authorized any action necessary to obtain a fair contract, including strike action. The membership felt compelled to take action despite the bitter experience of the last strike in 1976, when many current members walked out for 13 days and were fined two days pay for every day on strike. At the time union President Thomas Pisa was jailed for 30 days under the anti-union Taylor Law.

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