

Democrats, Republicans unite against strike by Buffalo, New York teachers

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Four thousand striking teachers in Buffalo, New York returned to classrooms Friday morning after a state supreme court judge issued a back-to-work injunction and threatened to impose massive fines under the Taylor law, which prohibits public employees from striking. The teachers walked out September 14 for the second time in a week in a dispute against the school district's demands for a reduction of retiree benefits and other contract concessions.

The strike resumed Thursday morning after the Buffalo Teachers Federation (BTF) representatives announced that the board of education had reneged on the agreement they reached with the board's chief negotiator and School Superintendent Marion Canedo. By mid-day Justice Kevin Dillon ordered union officials into the Supreme Court, then issued a restraining order requiring the teachers to return to work. Dillon also ordered union officials to return to court to face possible contempt charges. If found guilty the BTF officials could face jail and large fines.

The judge's intervention was part of a concerted campaign by both Democratic and Republican officials, aided by the news media, to intimidate teachers and force them to capitulate to the school district's demands. The city's Democratic mayor, Anthony Masiello, accused teachers of "unconscionable and selfish" behavior and the local news media has denounced teachers for everything from disrupting parents' schedules, to denying poor children the subsidized meals they would receive in school.

On Wednesday evening, during the televised US Senate debate in Buffalo, the one point where Hillary Clinton and her Republican opponent Rick Lazio expressed full agreement, was in their hostility to the teachers struggle. Clinton, who has been endorsed by the city and statewide teachers union, said, "I do

support the idea that the teachers should be working. Their actions against the Taylor Law are illegal and I don't believe that is appropriate." Lazio agreed, saying, "I am opposed to teachers striking where it is against the law. They need to get back to the classroom."

Teachers have been without a contract since June 1999. The school board is demanding concessions that would cut early retirement benefits, increase retirees' health contributions and medical co-payments, and reduce workers compensation. Teachers are demanding reduced class sizes and the restoration of art, music and physical education for grades K through three. The board is offering no pay increase for 1999 -2000, and 3.5 percent, 2.5percent, 2.5percent over the following three years. The board's latest pay offer is actually a 2 percent reduction over its original offer.

The board's attack on job security is even more ominous. One demand is to eliminate the "just cause" protection in disciplinary cases against temporary and probationary teachers, a measure which will allow school authorities to discipline or fire instructors on the most tenuous grounds. Currently 1,500 of the union's 4000 members have no tenure rights.

The board also wants to hire subcontractors to fill any position as long as current employees are not laid off and force 100 to 200 teachers to retire by mid year 2001 . The retirees could be replaced with subcontracted, nonunion employees. In addition, higher salaried non-tenured teachers could be dismissed for virtually any reason and replaced in the same manner. Any teacher who complained of poor teaching conditions, for instance, could be vulnerable to dismissal.

In the face of this concerted assault against the teachers, the union officials have proven incapable and unwilling to mobilize the support of the city's

overwhelmingly working class population in defense of public education. Such a struggle would entail challenging the subordination of education to the market and raise the necessity of a political break with the two big business parties. But the officials from BTF and its parent organization, the National Education Association, are directly allied with Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party, and fervently opposed to such a struggle.



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