

Philadelphia teachers authorize strike action

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A standing room only crowd of over 15,000 Philadelphia School District employees voted unanimously by a voice vote Tuesday morning to authorize the executive board of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) to call a strike if talks with the school board do not result in an acceptable contract.

The vote was in response to drastic changes in work rules, working conditions, and wages and benefits demanded by the School Board. The PFT represents 21,000 school employees in Philadelphia's 210,000-student public school system.

Changes demanded by the School Board include the elimination of step increments based on length of employment and advanced degrees in every salary schedule. The board wants to replace this with "merit pay" where raises are based on a principal's subjective evaluation of teacher performance.

The board also wants to eliminate seniority rights, removing length of employment as a factor in a teacher's right to choose a school, and allow principals to deny voluntary transfers to another school. Another board demand is an increase in the school day by an hour and 15 minutes and the school year by five days, with no increase in pay.

The board also wants to switch all school employees to a lower cost, less comprehensive HMO health plan which could cost employees up to \$1,000 per year in new out-of-pocket expenses. In addition, it wants to require a \$150 payment per day for the first five days of any hospitalization.

The district is reportedly proposing no wage increase in the first year of five-year contract, an introduction of pay for performance in the second year of the contract, and raises of 2 percent, 1 percent and 0 percent in the third, fourth and fifth years of the contract.

Philadelphia public school employees have gone on strike five times since the PFT acquired collective

bargaining rights in 1965. The last strike was in 1981. In 1972-73, during the administration of Democratic Mayor Frank Rizzo, the union leadership was jailed for violating a back-to-work order after a total of six weeks on strike. A settlement was reached on the eve of a general strike called by the Philadelphia labor movement. Several state laws passed in the 1990s have severely limited Pennsylvania teachers' ability to strike.

After the vote at Tuesday's meeting, union President Ted Kirsch, for the first time in the union's history, told school district employees to report to their schools even though there was no new contract. They were told to follow news reports on the results of legal actions taken by the union and the results of further negotiations.

The negotiations are for the first time being held under the restrictions of Act 46, a Pennsylvania law enacted in 1998, which among other things would allow a state takeover of the school system and no extension of a school district union contract after it expires.

On Tuesday evening, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court issued a second temporary injunction allowing extension of the contract until September 11 while negotiations continue. If the union leadership decides to call a strike, Act 46 requires them to give 48 hours notice.

In May, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge included \$1 million in the 2000-01 state budget for takeover preparations of the district and hired an executive search firm to look for a new leader for the school district due to its ongoing financial problems. The district has a projected deficit of \$80 million for the 2000-01 school year.

Act 46 provides for strong state fiscal and management oversight of the district under a takeover while significantly weakening the teachers union. Strikes would be forbidden. If teachers continued to strike, the law states that Pennsylvania Education

Secretary Eugene Hickok could suspend their teaching certification. Also under a takeover, the district's Board of Education would be stripped of its power, and a five-member school reform commission would be established to oversee the district. That commission would include Hickok, three members appointed by the governor, and one appointed by the mayor. Two of the governor's appointees and the mayor's appointee would be required to be from Philadelphia.

Another law signed by Governor Ridge last spring, the Education Empowerment Act, identified 11 districts in Pennsylvania, including Philadelphia, as academically distressed and therefore eligible for state takeover if scores do not improve within three years. More than 50 percent of district students perform in the bottom quarter in Pennsylvania on the state's standardized test. At the end of the 1999-2000 school year the district had 200 unfilled teacher vacancies.

At the strike authorization meeting Tuesday, PFT President Ted Kirsch spent the first 45 minutes urging school employees to contribute to the union's political action fund so the union bureaucracy could contribute to candidates they believe would advance the union's interests. Declaring the union "may lose some battles," he called on union members to contribute to the fund so the union could support "friendly politicians" in the Harrisburg legislature and in Washington. After playing a videotape of George W. Bush attacking Philadelphia school employees during a local television interview, Kirsch concluded his appeal with a call for support for Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore.

Gore has joined the chorus of big business politicians calling for stricter teacher "accountability" and the closing of "failing schools." In Philadelphia on Sunday for Labor Day festivities, Gore deliberately distanced himself from the teachers struggle. When asked about this snubbing, a PFT official told one member that it would be "too controversial" for Gore to publicly support the teachers in the midst of an election campaign.



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