

Philadelphia teachers strike

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Twenty-one thousand teachers and other school employees, members of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), went on strike at the close of the school day Friday, October 27 after talks between the PFT and school and city authorities failed to result in an agreement for a new contract. Negotiations continued throughout the weekend and as this article was being posted no settlement had been reached.

Shortly after the PFT called the strike—the first since a bitter 50-day struggle in 1981—Democratic Mayor John Street said he would not tolerate a lengthy walkout and threatened to use a recently enacted state law that would strip teachers of their certification and pensions for striking.

Earlier in the week Mayor Street and Republican Governor Tom Ridge met to lay the groundwork for a “friendly state takeover” of the school district under Act 46, passed by the Pennsylvania state legislature in 1998. Under the law the state Secretary of Education would appoint a five-member “School Reform” commission which would assume full control of a “distressed” school district. Following such a takeover teachers would be banned from striking and such issues as staffing assignments, class schedules and the academic calendar would no longer be negotiable.

Governor Ridge, a major proponent of school vouchers, has agreed to leave the mayor's appointed school board in control after a takeover and has praised the Democratic mayor for leading the assault on the teachers. The board is demanding the extension of the school day by one hour without additional pay, as well as the establishment of a two-tier pay system with “merit pay” for new teachers. Non-teaching employees would also receive smaller pay raises than instructors.

The school board's four-year offer calls for no raises in the first year and raises of 6 percent in the second and 4 percent in the third and fourth years. Under the old contract, new hires in Philadelphia had an annual

salary \$3,000 less than their suburban counterparts and teachers at the top of the pay scale were paid approximately \$10,000 less.

At his press conference Friday, Mayor Street, flanked by state legislative leaders, city council members, the city controller and the district attorney said, “This is our last best offer, folks. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to understand that there's no more money.” He later said, “It boggles my mind that 13,000 people are going to violate a court order that's going to result in the loss of their certification.”

In the face of these provocations the PFT leadership, headed by union President Ted Kirsch, has repeatedly bowed before state and city officials and demonstrated its inability and unwillingness to wage a serious struggle. Nearly two months ago on September 5, the first day of the school year, over 15,000 PFT members unanimously voiced their approval to authorize the union to call a strike. Kirsch told the PFT members to report to work while negotiations continued.

Even after September 28, when Mayor Street threatened to unilaterally impose a new contract, union officials refused to call a strike. The school board then made it clear it would implement a new contract on November 1 that included drastic cuts in health benefits, such as higher co-pays for doctor visits and requirements that new members enroll in HMO's offering different coverage than current employees. Even then the union's only response was to call a protest at the board's monthly meeting, and call a strike by Friday if no settlement were reached.

One possible factor that may have led the PFT to finally call the strike was the school board's insistence that it would no longer pay as much into the union's multimillion-dollar Health and Welfare Fund. In negotiations over the weekend union officials continued to accept take-aways from their members, including agreeing to an extension of the teacher

workday by a half-hour without pay.

Philadelphia teachers are angered over being blamed for the crisis in public education, when school authorities have continuously slashed funding and left them with overcrowded classrooms and inadequate books and supplies. State and city authorities have refused to provide necessary funds, despite large government surpluses. Just hours before the mayor announced he had no money to improve teachers' conditions he was meeting with officials of the National Football League to discuss how much the city would subsidize a new stadium for the Philadelphia Eagles.

Despite the efforts of the Philadelphia news media to brand the teachers as enemies of "reform," they have received popular support. Last Thursday and Friday hundreds of students at the city's high schools walked out of class and rallied in support of the PFT. Chanting "Street doesn't care!" over 500 high students staged a spontaneous rally at City Hall Friday morning.

But the teachers and school employees face one major disadvantage: they are saddled with a union leadership that is politically aligned with the very same forces attacking public education. PFT officials backed Street's election last year despite the fact that as president of the city council, under former Mayor Ed Rendell, he imposed drastic wage and benefit concessions on city employees in 1992 to pay for a budget deficit created by state and federal spending cuts. The union officials did so based on the spurious claim that the Democrats defended the right to education and teachers' conditions. Now the same union officials are pathetically complaining about Street's "collusion" with the Republican governor.

Similar teacher struggles, including a strike earlier this year in Buffalo, New York and a walkout in Detroit in 1999, were betrayed by local affiliates of the American Federation of Teachers. In both cases, under the guise of school reform, the unions accepted the erosion of teachers' conditions being demanded by big business and its political representatives.



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