

# Philadelphia teachers union calls off strike

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The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers called off a strike by 21,000 teachers and other school employees early Monday morning before classes in the country's sixth largest school district were disrupted. The PFT leadership called the walkout at the end of the school day Friday, October 28, after waiting nearly two months since the membership voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike against the school board's take-away demands.

Following all-night negotiations and the announcement of the settlement at 5:40 a.m. Monday morning, PFT President Ted Kirsch said, "We're asking that all of our members report to work on time and perform their regular duties."

Neither Kirsch nor Mayor John Street, whose appointed school board members led the attack on the teachers, would discuss the details of the agreement. Hoping to avoid angering union members before a scheduled ratification vote Thursday night, Street said, "At an appropriate time, we will make as much information as we reasonably can" available to the public.

A source close to the negotiations said that the union agreed to allow teachers to work an extra half-hour each day, instead of the one hour—without pay—originally demanded by the school board. It is not clear whether the extra half-hour will be with or without pay. The source also said the city agreed to reinstate the pay teachers currently receive for extracurricular activities.

Last month Mayor Street, a Democrat elected last year with the backing of the PFT and other unions, unilaterally imposed new work rules, including the one-hour increase to begin next year and an 18.1 percent raise over five years. Behind the mayor stood Governor Tom Ridge, a Republican advocate of school vouchers, who said he would order a state takeover under a new law if Street requested it. Such a move would have

allowed the state to revoke the credentials of any teacher who remained on strike. On the eve of the strike Street said he and Ridge had agreed on a takeover plan that would lead to the firing of striking teachers.

Teachers opposed the district's plan to implement a performance-based pay scale for new teachers and greater control over work assignments and transfers. School administrators are seeking to place the burden of the district's \$80 million deficit on the backs of teachers. Immediately following the settlement announcement the Philadelphia media raised questions about how the new contract would be paid for.

State funding for the indebted school district is contingent on the city pushing through its so-called educational reforms. Given the aborted strike there is little doubt that the board got most of its demands, without addressing teachers' complaints about overcrowded classes and inadequate supplies for the district's 210,000 students.

In addition to lacking any strategy to oppose the attack on education and the anti-strike laws, the PFT's decision to call off the strike was apparently influenced by concerns that a strike could hurt Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore. With a low turnout already predicted for inner-city areas like Philadelphia, several union bureaucrats and Democratic politicians voiced fears that the city's voters would not cross picket lines set up in front of schools being used as polling locations.



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