

Teachers struggles erupt in New York, New Jersey

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Members of two teachers unions in the New York City area went on strike Thursday, November 29, renewing contract struggles that were deferred after the September 11 attack.

About 300 teachers and guidance counselors in 9 of the 10 Catholic high schools with members in the Lay Faculty Association walked out. The schools were forced to remain closed or to close early despite attempts to keep them open using nuns, priests and administrators. Teachers are demanding a 15 percent raise over three years, with salaries now ranging from \$29,893 to \$41,745. The union has indicated that it would settle for the 8 percent the New York City Archdiocese has offered, but not if it is stretched over three years.

A major issue is the union demand for a second pension plan to be paid for by members to supplement the present pension of only \$12,000 received after 20 years. The archdiocese says it would have future legal liabilities. It also objects that the union's demand for bonuses of \$1,500 and \$2,000 in the second and third years of the contract would in effect be a subsidy for the second pension.

Teachers at the 10 Catholic high schools had begun a strike on September 11 but called it off after the attack on the World Trade Center. The archdiocese was seeking to cut costs even before then. It had already moved to close a \$20 million budget gap with the closing of three schools.

In addition, the larger Federation of Catholic Teachers is negotiating a new contract for 3,600 teachers at several hundred elementary and high schools in the archdiocese. The elementary school teachers earn from \$26,712 to \$37,010 a year. The private Catholic school salaries are being compared to those for public school teachers, which range from

\$31,900 to \$70,000 after 25 years, and to those in the wealthier suburbs, which are up to \$20,000 a year higher.

United Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, whose 80,000 members in New York City's public schools have entered their second year without a contract, has made no effort to mobilize support behind the Catholic schoolteachers.

The second school strike to break out last week was in the Middletown, New Jersey public school district. Thirty of Middletown's 61,000 residents died in the World Trade Center attack and negotiations were postponed for two and a half months. The school board immediately obtained a court injunction declaring the strike illegal, with the threat of fines, jail terms and dismissal. When teachers and secretaries defied the injunction, all 1,000 of them were ordered to appear before State Superior Court Judge Clarkson S. Fisher, Jr.

The Middletown local of the New Jersey Education Association went out on strike in 1998 despite an injunction, but the union settled an hour before a hearing on a possible dismissal. That contract ended last July.

The teachers want a 4.5 percent salary increase in the first year of the contract, while the Middletown school board has offered 3.8 percent. The average teacher's salary is \$56,000. The school board also wanted the education workers to increase their contribution for medical insurance to an average of \$600 per member, from \$250 annually. The union offered various counterproposals, including a higher co-payment on prescription drugs, but negotiations broke down again Sunday night when the board rejected that proposal.

Cuts in education budgets took place even during the recent economic boom in New York and are now being

exacerbated by the recession and financial losses since September 11. In addition, President Bush has still not delivered billions in promised aid to New York for disaster relief.

The New York state budget was four months late even before September 11, leaving school districts without desperately needed funds and producing a fiscal crisis. Districts in poor municipalities rely on property tax revenues supplemented by state aid to complete their local budgets.

A critical situation is arising in Buffalo, in western New York State, which receives 60 percent of its revenue from the state. Buffalo was counting on an increase of \$31 million in aid for a total of \$153 million plus \$23 million for the schools. Draconian cuts, including layoffs and school closings, are now being proposed to cover the city's deficit, estimated to range from \$54 million to \$97 million. Moody's Investors Service put Buffalo on a watch list for a possible credit downgrade if "expenditure reductions do not suffice," which would reduce the city's future borrowing ability.

Hundreds of Buffalo students picketed at various school sites throughout the week and denounced the layoff of 430 teachers, librarians, counselors and psychologists along with 60 teachers aides scheduled to take effect November 30. The layoffs will ripple throughout the system, shifting teachers into new classrooms on a seniority basis. In some instances, grade level consolidations will increase class sizes from 20 to 28 students per class and in some cases to 40 students. Special Education inclusion programs, Advanced Placement and Gifted and Talented courses are slated for elimination.

Six schools under state supervision due to low test scores will not receive the material support and remedial staff required to improve conditions. The district's budget crisis has been worsened by the growth of charter schools, which have diverted \$11 million from the public system.

Buffalo School Superintendent Marion Canedo has demanded all unionized school employees take a 5 percent wage cut to avoid half the layoffs. In an effort to show his cooperation with city officials, Philip Rumor, president of the Buffalo Teachers Federation, offered to postpone a 1.5 percent wage increase for his members. Rank-and-file teachers overwhelmingly rejected the union's proposal.

Buffalo Board of Education officials have warned that budget cuts will be "difficult to reverse" and "things will get tougher" in coming years. They have also predicted future building closures.



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