

Two hundred arrests in New Jersey teachers strike

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Some two hundred striking teachers in Middletown, New Jersey have been thrown in jail since Monday afternoon for defying a judge's back-to-work order. Their number is expected to grow as the walkout by 1,000 teachers, secretaries, nurses and school social workers continued on Thursday, when at least another 65 teachers were led off in handcuffs after rejecting an ultimatum that they return to the classrooms or go to jail for contempt of court.

Teachers in the middle class suburb, 50 miles south of New York City, walked out on November 29, three months after the expiration of their contract. The teachers are resisting the school board's demand that they pay more for health care coverage. The increase—from \$250 a year presently to \$600 or \$800, depending on salaries—would all but eliminate any wage increase, teachers say.

The very day the strike began school officials—some of whom likened the teachers to the Taliban and called the struggle against them a “war”—sought and received an injunction from Monmouth County Superior Court Judge Clarkson S. Fisher. On Monday, Fisher began jailing the strikers in alphabetical order.

As they were brought before the judge teachers remained defiant, with some denouncing the school board as criminals and tyrants. “When you give in, you are saying ‘Keep stepping on me,’” striker Barbara Bacmeister told Judge Fisher. “Sooner or later you have to stand up for what's right.”

“I'm a soccer mom, I drive a van and I have a dog,” science teacher Katie Connelly said, as she was waiting to go to jail. “But this is our revolution. The only way to get respect is if you stand up for yourself.”

Each time Judge Fisher found groups of three or four or five people in contempt and deputies led them out of the courtroom, the 150 teachers inside stood and

applauded their comrades. Outside, members of the Middletown South High School football team, which won a state championship game last Saturday, cheered for their head coach and an assistant coach, both of whom were jailed. Teachers also milled around a rear door and cheered handcuffed colleagues each time deputies led them to vans for the trips to the county jail.

By Thursday, three judges were assigned to question the teachers in order to expedite the jailings. According to the injunction, those in jail will be brought before a judge in a week's time and asked again whether they will return to work. If they refuse, they will be jailed again.

Three years ago the teachers, who are members of the Middletown Township Education Association, went on strike. The board got an injunction against the walkout and voted to impose a contract on the teachers.

Outside the courthouse in Freehold, several hundred teachers and their supporters have maintained a vigil. Teachers from surrounding New Jersey districts have joined them, as well teachers from New York City, where Catholic school teachers are on strike and public school teachers have been working without a contract for two years.

“They want to take everything away,” one Middletown teacher explained to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The school board is bottom-line oriented, not student-oriented.” A fellow striker added, “We were more prepared to be militant than three years ago, when we struck after not having a contract for more than a year. That contract settlement was never signed and many provisions of the previous contract that should have been changed were not.” It was the same judge that issued an injunction at that time, she added.

Eileen Stroeber, a high school English teacher in the district since 1974, said, “We've been asking for

negotiations and a fair settlement for months, but there hasn't been any cooperation on the board's part. We are dedicated to our profession. The board is treating us unprofessionally. It's the board that should be going to jail."

"We all wish the judge had insisted that both sides negotiate until a settlement was achieved, but the judge hasn't done that. Even though we are very supportive of the job action, we are devastated by the jailings. We have children at home with only one parent, and it is very hard on them. We are being treated like criminals, being handcuffed and taken away in paddy wagons. This is not professional treatment; it is demeaning. This strike will be settled, but it will be a very long time before things return to normal."

Roy Edwards, who teaches automotive technology for the Monmouth County Vocational School District, said, "Middletown in the past and present has been a fast-building, progressive community. The teachers have served the community in a manner to be complimented. The teachers are also parents in the community and have children to educate. Now they are being overlooked and mandated to. The negotiations seem to be only asking for reductions.

"The difference between the two sides on salaries is insignificant, but their buying back of health benefits is not progress, it's regressive. The board is offering to let you pay out of your pocket, but the raise they are offering is nowhere near enough to cover the cost. The health package is one of the big benefits that attract people to teaching.

"The jailings are a show of power. What the teachers are doing is not criminal; they don't deserve to be classified with a criminal element. The teachers have expressed their desires for over three years; this is not an overnight thing. The strike is not a bullying tactic; it is what they have to do to demonstrate their commitment. This is true not only in Middletown, but throughout the state."



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