

Chicago: Evergreen Park teachers strike

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Classes were canceled Tuesday in Evergreen Park, Illinois after negotiations between the union and school board broke down Monday night. This is the first ever strike for District 124, which is organized under the Illinois Federation of Teachers.

One hundred fifty teachers at five schools have walked out and, according to the union, will remain on strike until a contract can be agreed upon. No further negotiations have been scheduled.

The action follows on the heels of the Chicago teachers' week-and-a-half strike late last month. That strike ended in a sell-out agreement between the union and the Democratic administration of Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel.

Evergreen Park is a working class city in Cook County surrounded on all four sides by Chicago. According to the 2009 census, 4.2 percent of the population is below the poverty line, 2.4 percent of families are below the poverty line. Although relatively less impacted by the economic decline of the Chicago area, the schools of Evergreen Park are nevertheless coming under attack in the same manner as those throughout the state of Illinois—one of the worst-off states in terms of budget deficits—and across the country.

Contract negotiations for District 124 started in April. Only last week, teachers voted down, 147 to 1, a four-year contract that would have increased the cost of health insurance for teachers and decreased retirement benefits. Last month, 80 percent of teachers voted to authorize a strike.

The school board is asking for teachers to contribute more to their health insurance coverage. Teachers are asking for a 9.6 percent raise over a three-year span, while the school board is offering only a 5.5 percent raise. The union has already agreed to a cutback in retirement benefits that would add up to about \$180,000 in savings annually for the school board.

Beyond the immediate pay issues, the board is seeking to implement a test-based teacher evaluation system, tying a 1 percent “bonus” to the results.

The union is asking for an increase in compensation for aides who work with disabled children in their daily tasks, and to reform the “just-cause discipline” policy to allow teachers to dispute disciplinary actions taken against them.

While concessions are being demanded of the teachers, school board records show that the district has a budget surplus of \$16.2 million. The board insists that the money is needed for remodeling, repairs and as future pension funds.

Teachers have expressed their exasperation at the demands of the district. Eileen Gorman, an art teacher of 25 years, told local television news ABC7 Chicago, “This is very upsetting. We shouldn’t be out here. We should be teaching.” She added, “You can’t roll over and let them take everything from you without putting up a fight.”

The news reported that many parents and children had joined the picket line in support of the teachers. Residents honked in support and delivered food and drinks to the picketers throughout the day. The Evergreen Park Federation of Teachers Facebook page has rapidly garnered support. “The right choice was made, the contract was unfair!” wrote one parent, who said her family “supports Dist 124 Teachers and their strike.” Another said, “It is disgusting the way you are being treated!!! Keep fighting for what is right!”

Two other Chicago-area districts face the possibility of strikes. Teachers in North Shore School District 112 in Highland Park and Prairie Grove Consolidated District 46 in Crystal Lake have authorized a strike. Like Evergreen Park, the union locals have been in negotiations since April. Highland Park is threatening to strike as soon as October 12.

Lake Forest School District 115 teachers are also

fighting for an increase in raises over three years of 5.6 percent, 6.5 percent and 5.6 percent. The district is only considering a raise of 2.6 percent, 3.4 percent and 3.4 percent over three years and is demanding that teachers increase the percentage of their health insurance costs as well.



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