

Teachers, school staff strike in Cleveland suburb

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Teachers went on strike in Strongsville, Ohio, a more affluent Cleveland suburb, on Monday. Talks between the union and the school board broke down last weekend and ended with no agreement.

The Strongsville Education Association (SEA) declared an official deadend in the negotiations on January 30. Since then, a federal mediator has been leading, and arranging, each round of negotiations. The two sides have been negotiating a new contract since the old one expired last June. No further negotiations are scheduled between the union and the board.

On June 30, 2011, Republican governor John Kasich signed House Bill 153, the state budget for the next two fiscal years. The final version of the budget bill cut close to \$3 billion in funding for public education. Post-secondary education also took a \$440 million cut. At the same time that funding was cut for public schools, the bill called for a massive expansion of charter schools and voucher programs.

Seniority and pensions are major targets at the state and local level. While not included in HB 153, they are part of the demands of the Strongsville Board of Education. By getting rid of seniority, in favor of so-called “pay for performance,” or “value added measures,” it can get rid of the highest paid teachers first.

Quality has nothing to do with it. Teachers would be fired based on evaluations, with 50 percent of the evaluation based on student test scores.

Although pursued on a local level, the policy is of a piece with the campaign to eliminate teacher tenure at the federal level in President Obama’s Race To the Top program. Tying federal funding to performance on standardized tests, charter school permits, and cost-cutting, the Obama administration and its state-level counterparts have compelled local school districts to

carry out an all-out assault on the living standards of teachers and quality of classroom instruction.

In the face of such an attack, the union has gone out of its way to stress that it is “ready to negotiate” with the Strongsville school board. “Let me be clear,” SEA spokesperson Christine Canning said in a statement on the union’s web site. “Any assertion, insinuation, or implication that SEA is not ready and willing to bargain is patently false. We are ready.” The Ohio Education Association and National Education Association, parent organizations of the SEA, endorsed Obama’s re-election.

According to the school board’s proposal, the district intends to eliminate the teachers’ pension pickup, equal to 9.3 percent of their salary, and instead add that onto the base salary “in such a way that no employee experiences any change (no increase or decrease) in his/her effective salary amount.” Such a change will bring the current base salary for a Strongsville teacher from \$34,779 to \$38,013.

The board is also seeking to raise the amount teachers pay into monthly health insurance premiums from 10 percent to 15 percent. The new contract would raise the cap on the monthly amount paid per family from \$150 to \$200. Teachers would also see dental insurance premiums rise to 15 percent.

According to the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, picketing teachers “were out in force at all 11 of the district’s schools” on Monday and Tuesday. The picketers opposed the districts’ hiring of 140 replacements on Monday and 180 on Tuesday. These staffing levels are far lower than the 385 teachers, nurses, psychologists and counselors on strike, and are inadequate to provide services to the 6,200 students. Not all of the replacements reportedly showed up to cross the picket lines.

The city put extra police on duty to direct traffic at school entrances, and to block teacher pickets. Despite police presence, the local Cleveland television station Channel 19 Action News reported that a parent bringing children to school hit a striking teacher while driving through the entrance.

After outrage over attempts to silence students at a February school board meeting, Strongsville superintendent John Krupinski dismissed rumors that the high school banned students from posting messages of solidarity on Twitter this week. He told the *Plain Dealer* that the schools are only enforcing their normal rules of not allowing cellphone use during class, but students are free to send messages outside of class periods.

Jordan Kelley, a student liaison, charged that school superintendent Krupinski called his mother and threatened to eject him from the board if he did not maintain “neutrality” in relation to the labor dispute.

Students have defied the rules to express their support for the teachers. One student commented via Twitter, “I think the parents are over reacting about Strongsville teachers on strike. If no one stood up and voiced their opinion we’d get nowhere.” Here she refers to some of the parents who have expressed hostility to the strike.

Another student commented, “Strongsville Highschool principal says the new subs are better than the teachers. What an idiot!”

Other students, speaking to local media outside Strongsville High School, said they did not feel safe inside with the replacement teachers. The district was only able to hire 45 replacements to fill 100 teaching positions, with only 30 of those replacements showing up (see the *Plain Dealer* video: Strongsville high school students describe the chaotic conditions in their school on the first day of the strike).

Many parents kept their children at home in support of the striking teachers, or out of concern for their children’s well being. The hiring of Huffmaster Strike Services has alarmed parents after it emerged that during a 2006 contract struggle in Sandusky, Ohio, some one third of the security guards hired by the company had criminal records. Alternative Workforce, Inc., the company supplying the replacement workers for the Strongsville teachers’ strike, is a subsidiary of Michigan-based Huffmaster.



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