

South Butler, Pennsylvania teachers strike

Paul Sherman
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Teachers in the South Butler School District went on strike last Thursday, March 15, to demand pay raises, as well as lower contribution rates for health care costs. The district includes 168 teachers and approximately 2,400 students from Clinton, Jefferson, Penn, Winfield and Saxonburg in the southern part of Butler County.

Located just north of Pittsburgh, Butler County is known for steelmaking and is the headquarters of AK Steel Corporation. Westinghouse Electric is the number two employer in the county, which is also home to other manufacturers, mining, quarrying, oil and gas extraction.

The teachers have been ordered to return to work by April 3 or face fines and penalties. Under Pennsylvania law, students must be provided with 180 days of instruction by June 15. Known as Act 88, the law has been supported by both major teachers' unions in the state and limits any teachers' strikes to at most about two weeks.

"We are returning when we expected to," said Brooke Witt, the labor relations consultant for the South Butler County Education Association, the teachers' union. The union has also limited picketing, but said it will picket Monday and Friday this week and hold a rally Wednesday night.

The last contract with the teachers expired in 2014 and teachers have been working under an extended contract since then. The school board has refused the teachers' demands that pay raises be retroactive to mid-2014 and have failed to move on health care. According to a post on the Support South Butler Teachers Facebook page, a teacher with a master's degree with five years of service would only be paid \$46,100, an increase of just \$216, compared to the \$45,884 paid to the same teacher in 2014.

No negotiations have been scheduled between the school board and the union. Negotiators met last week when the School Board presented its "best offer."

The Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT) called off a strike that had been set for March 2, which would have coincided with the powerful movement of educators in neighboring West Virginia. The PFT, ignoring the vote by 94 percent in favor of a strike, reached an agreement with the school board, but has kept the content of the deal secret. No details have been released and teachers have neither seen nor voted on it. The 3,000 educators in the district had been working under a contract extension since June 2015.

The author recommends:

Three thousand Pittsburgh schoolworkers vote on strike

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