

## Galling gambit: Union strikes taxpayers

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This isn't your father's economy. Business isn't booming. People aren't getting regular annual pay raises and expanding fringe benefits. Instead, salaries have been cut or frozen and jobs eliminated. All the while, the rising cost of health benefits - and the increasing amount employees must contribute for shrinking benefit plans - further erodes incomes.

Times are hard.

This is today's reality. Yet, leaders of the Neshaminy teachers union continue to live in the past. They demand that which taxpayers cannot afford and now go on strike in a wrong-headed and selfish effort to force concessions from a school board so far unwilling to follow their free-spending predecessors' disastrous ways.

As school board President Ritchie Webb characterized the union's strategy, "They pulled a play out of their outdated playbook by going into negotiations asking for the moon, then making a few concessions along the way hoping the school board would feel pressured into meeting in the middle."

Problem is, as Webb rightly asserts, "There is no such middle ground ... because meeting the (union) halfway with their demands will still require tax increases, spending our district reserve funds, and reduction of student programs."

Board members cannot allow that to happen; neither can taxpayers. Not when Neshaminy teachers already are among the highest paid in the state - despite a contract impasse that has frozen salaries for more than three years. But even with their incomes stagnant - if you want to call an average annual salary of nearly \$80,000 stagnant - teachers continue to pay nothing, nada, zero toward their Cadillac-style health benefits.

They recently only dropped their demand for continued free health insurance. But their insulting proposal for a contribution of 8 percent of the cost of a health plan remains well below the average for the private sector where workers typically contribute between 25 and 35 percent of cost, or several thousand dollars for family coverage. What's more, the union would lock in that 8 percent for three years.

Unacceptable!

Especially when nearly half the district's 654 unionized teachers are getting paid close to \$96,000 a year and can well afford to share a much greater load of the health care costs now carried entirely by taxpayers.

How did Neshaminy get to this point? First, Neshaminy is not alone. Other school districts, likewise, are saddled with unaffordable union contracts that earlier boards agreed to when times were good and taxpayers less inclined to endure the inconveniences of a teachers strike. Time was, the threat of a strike would fill school board meetings to overflowing with taxpayers screaming for board members to make concessions.

Parents must not fall into that costly trap again as that settle-at-all-costs mentality has come back to haunt school officials - and taxpayers - statewide.

Here's the situation school boards now face: The bad economy has choked off revenue; health care costs have spiraled out of control; and the crashed market has bludgeoned pension funds, leaving school districts legally responsible to make good on once-fat investment portfolios. Additionally, school districts now must calculate spending plans that factor Act 1 - the state-mandated tax cap - into the formula.

As one taxpayer told a reporter, "You can't get blood from a stone."

"It's greedy," said another of the union. "They're being selfish."

And power hungry. Among the earlier giveaways in Neshaminy was "equal say" - in essence, union veto power over educational initiatives. (Imagine telling your boss "No.") That concession was written into the 2002 contract. Since then, the district's statewide ranking as determined by standardized testing has been in a free fall, dropping from 153rd to 245th out of 500 school districts.

Clearly, the board must get back the power it negotiated away while refusing to yield on financial issues. The board's offer of 1 percent salary increases in each of the next three years is plenty considering the times. So is its offer of retro pay for education credits attained over the last three years. On the other hand, the union's demand for 80 percent of lost wage increases over the last three years, which adds up to millions, harkens back to the foolish days of yore.

Earth to "Planet Neshaminy": Get real!

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