

School's out

10 Jan 2012 — Bucks County Courier Times

Neshaminy teachers hit the picket lines Monday.

By Christian Menno

Staff writer

As Neshaminy teachers marched the picket lines on a chilly Day 1 of their strike, their body temperature and morale likely received a boost when their leader arrived on the scene.

Neshaminy Federation of Teachers President Louise Boyd joined the picketers outside Neshaminy High School early Monday morning with a box full of navy blue knit hats emblazoned with the NFT logo. She made similar stops to other picket lines outside of other district schools.



Teachers at the high school were treated to coffee and doughnuts provided by Dave Gain, a Verizon employee and member of the Communication Workers of America Local 13,000 based in Philadelphia.

Gain stopped by to support a fellow union because members of the NFT supported Verizon employees during their recent strike.

Boyd is proud of the teachers, saying the picket line was the last place she or any coworkers wanted to be Monday.

"They continue to stick together and that's what's important here."

Boyd said the membership is fully prepared to not only endure the cold but also the inevitable backlash that likely will come from community members upset at the decision to strike.

While the occasional driver honked in support of the teachers as they rode past the picket line, others were not so friendly. One person slowed down to yell, "Get back to work!"

Boyd said regardless of the board's decision to suspend contract talks during the work stoppage, union representatives still plan to show up for Thursday's negotiation session.

"I've heard the rhetoric, but we haven't received an official notice from the district (that they have canceled the session) so we have every intention of negotiating," she added.

NFT officials view the canceled session as one that lends support to their longstanding claim the board is unwilling to negotiate in good faith and is more than happy to leave the issue unsettled, operating under the terms of the expired 2008 contract.

Just how long the law permits teachers to strike remains to be seen. The state Department of Education has yet to inform both sides of a possible timetable. The union must return to work to complete 180 student days by June 14, the last scheduled student day. Even if this strike runs its course under the letter of the law, the union still has the option of calling for a second strike in spring that would push the last day of school to late June.

School board Vice President Kim Koutsouradis, who stopped by the high school Monday to survey the situation, said the board made the right move in putting a stop to the talks in the midst of a strike.

"After four years of negotiating in good faith with the teachers, I can guarantee that if the teachers get back into the classroom, I would have our negotiating team sit down with them the very same day," Koutsouradis

said. "They would be locked in a room doing what needs to be done to find a solution. But people need to understand that if we give in and give the teachers what they want, it's going to affect educational programs in the district."

He added the board is considering suspending the teachers' health care benefits during the work stoppage. Teachers have been receiving free health care during the impasse as per the terms of their former deal. During talks, the NFT has offered that teachers contribute a fixed amount of 8 percent in any negotiated contract based on current insurance costs. The board, though, is looking for a 15 percent contribution -- but that amount would rise as insurance costs likely increase year to year.

NFT Vice President Jeff Dunkley, however, said the union has been waiting nearly four years for around-the-clock negotiations, but since that didn't happen, they felt the need to strike.

"We've tried everything," he said. "We've met over 40 times; we've modified our original proposals five times since our initial offer. We know what we have on the table is both modest and affordable. I think any reasonable observer would have to conclude that the board is just not interested in settling. I have children that attend Neshaminy schools and it breaks my heart that they're not in class today."

One of the more colorful picketers was Suzi Drake of Penndel. The teacher constructed a homemade sign outlined with red and blue Christmas lights.

"I think parents need to be mindful that a lot of the teachers live in the community and have children going to school in the community," she said. "They need to be mindful of what is sometimes being said (about teachers) around children."

Koutsouradis shares similar concerns about repairing the division in the community brought about by the bitter dispute.

"In the past I have defended our teachers and I will continue to do that," he said. "We have great guys and gals here, but I think it could take a long time for the public to regain that love for the teachers."

"School's out" Bucks County Courier Times 10 Jan 2012: A1