

Teachers vow to stand their ground

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By Christian Menno

Staff writer

At a union rally Monday, hundreds of Neshaminy teachers enthusiastically vowed to return to the picket lines Tuesday, despite the district's claim that doing so would break the law.

"Our position remains unchanged and the members have the absolute right to continue to strike," said one Neshaminy Federation of Teachers official at the labor rally held in Core Creek Park in Middletown.

Also there to pump up the striking teachers were past NFT union presidents and officials, along with members of other unions, including the Teamsters and the AFL-CIO.

A few miles away, parents and state lawmakers held their own rally, showing they stand behind the school board and its refusal to give in to the union's demands for retroactive pay and contribution levels to health care premiums. The union has been working under a contract that expired in 2008.

School board President Ritchie Webb issued a letter to the community Monday reiterating the board's stance that the union made an official request for binding arbitration - which, according to state law, would require a suspension of the strike for up to 10 days while the school board considers whether to agree to arbitration.

In the letter sent to the newspaper, Webb said the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers' decision to continue the work stoppage is disappointing.

"Once again, this rogue NFT leadership has shown total disregard for the law and our community," he said. "... Obviously, this attempt at binding arbitration is an NFT ploy designed to mislead the public and the board, knowing full well that past experiences with arbitrators tend to favor the union."

NFT officials last week said that they would immediately end the strike if the board agreed to enter binding arbitration if seven days of around-the-clock negotiations failed to produce a settlement.

The union has said that it was not an official request - noting that it was never delivered in writing to the state Board of Mediation as required by law - but merely a conditional offer made in response to a comment from school board member Kim Koutsouradis. Koutsouradis at last week's board meeting said that he'd favor district negotiators engaging in around-the-clock talks with the union if the strike would be ended.

Webb said that although he now views the strike as illegal, the district will likely not take action against picketing teachers Tuesday.

"Since we already expect them to return to work Friday, it would be pointless to take any legal action now," he added. "It would be well past Friday by the time it got through the courts."

The teachers, who have been on strike since Jan. 9, must return to class by Friday if they plan another strike this school year. That's because law requires 180 days of instruction to be completed before the end of June.

The board has suspended contract talks during the strike, but offered to return to the bargaining table once teachers return to work.

Union members Monday disputed Webb's assessment of arbitration, adding that it gives both sides a chance to plead their case in front of an impartial third party.



The teachers' solidarity event was planned to coincide with the birthday of civil rights activist and labor advocate Martin Luther King Jr.

"I have yet to feel alone, every day walking through the schools; every day out on the picket lines ... we are absolutely not alone," NFT President Louise Boyd told the crowd.

Several past NFT officials and presidents offered encouragement to the teachers and relayed stories from the previous Neshaminy teacher strikes in 1969 and 1980-81.

"As long as you are here, we will be there for you," said former NFT president Bill Smith on behalf of his fellow retired Neshaminy teachers.

George Schaubhut, another former union president, was a first-year teacher during the 1969 work stoppage. Monday, he told the crowd that the teachers who fought for their rights back then set the stage for the teachers of today. And the teachers of today, he added, are setting the stage for the next generation of educators.

"I am so proud watching all of you on the picket line," he said. "You are carrying on a tradition that's lasted more than 40 years of teachers speaking for teachers. Continue to stand strong and stay together."

Alan Malachowski, president of the North Penn Education Association, said that he's been frustrated by what he sees as the Neshaminy school board stonewalling contract talks.

"I'm greatly disappointed that the Neshaminy school board refuses to bargain in good faith and has forced you to go out on strike," Malachowski added. "Believe me, I know how difficult that decision was for you. I know that you would rather be in your classrooms. You have demonstrated patience, dedication and professionalism throughout the four years you have worked without a contract."

The crowd chanted "enough is enough" as Malachowski outlined his view of the negotiation process during the last three-plus years of contract talks.

The teachers' salaries have been frozen since the contract expired in 2008. They continue to receive free health care.

"Teachers vow to stand their ground" [Bucks County Courier Times](#) 17 Jan 2012: A1