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Philly Catholic high school teachers on strike

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PHILADELPHIA -- As incoming freshmen began orientation for the new school year and the archdiocese prepared to welcome a new archbishop, Philadelphia Catholic high school teachers went on strike Sept. 6.

Other students at the 17 Catholic high schools in the Philadelphia Archdiocese were to begin orientation sessions Sept. 8 -- the date of the installation of Archbishop Charles J. Chaput as new archbishop -- and Sept. 9.

Most of the more than 700 striking teachers voted against the archdiocesan contract proposal presented Sept. 6.

"The main issue now and since the beginning has centered on job security," said Rita Schwartz, president of the Association of Catholic School Teachers Local 1776.

Archdiocesan high schools opened Sept. 7 and were to be staffed by administrators and nonunion employees, according to Mary Rochford, archdiocesan superintendent of schools.

"Every school has its plan and is ready to go," she said during a news conference after the strike was announced.

Richard McCarron, archdiocesan secretary for Catholic education, said the archdiocese had contacted the teachers' union and was willing to resume negotiations.

"This is not a contract for the past, it's a contract for the future," McCarron said. "If we are to educate our students to enter a very rapidly changing world, then we need to be able to deliver the educational services that are going to prepare them for this world. That doesn't necessarily mean holding on to the same ways we have done things."

"It is a sad day for the archdiocese," he added, "because we are here to educate 16,500 students and their well-being and our parents' concern for their education is (paramount) to us."

McCarron said the contract dispute was not primarily about salary and benefits but about "the delivery of educational services" such as hiring part-time teachers to meet changing educational needs.

He singled out modern language programs in particular, where plans to establish courses in Farsi and to expand existing two-year Mandarin Chinese courses to four years would require hiring teachers with specialized skills.

Hiring part-time teachers is one of the proposals that have proven troublesome in the contract. McCarron said the teachers had been misinformed by their association leadership about the implications of the part-time hires.

He said teachers have been told that they will be replaced by part-time teachers, which he said is incorrect. "We have said across the table all summer long that when the student-teacher ratio is defined, no part-time teacher will ever replace a full-time teacher."

McCarron was also asked about "constriction and bumping," another aspect of the contract the teachers'

association members have said could hurt their job security because if school enrollment declines certain teachers would be constricted or "bumped" from the faculty to retain the established student-teacher ratio.

In previous years, the teachers were automatically assigned to a new school. The proposed contract changes this procedure and would require teachers to be interviewed at a school with an opening and their subsequent hiring would be based on particular qualifications.

Schwartz told Catholic News Service that the teachers were understandably concerned about their chances of being rehired once their school was closed or enrollment went down.

She said the union was willing to resume negotiations Sept. 8 and hoped these sessions would involve a mediator, an idea the archdiocese has previously rejected. She also said she would like to get the 711 teachers back to work as soon as possible, provided the contract was something they agreed upon.

Schwartz said the striking teachers did not plan to interfere with Archbishop Chaput's Sept. 8 installation. A rally was scheduled to take place at the archdiocesan offices a block away from the Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul that day.

The teachers' union has been part of the Philadelphia Archdiocese since 1968. For the past five months, both sides have been negotiating a new contract to replace the three-year contract that just expired.

[Contributing to this report were Carol Zimmermann and the staff of the Catholic Standard & Times in Philadelphia.]

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