

N.Y. teachers vote to strike during pope's visit

Nicole Neroulias Religion News Service | Apr. 3, 2008

NEW YORK (RNS) Teachers from 10 New York Catholic high schools voted Tuesday (April 1) night to strike while Pope Benedict XVI visits New York later this month.

The Lay Faculty Association, a union representing about 420 teachers in schools from Poughkeepsie to Staten Island, wants the Archdiocese of New York to agree to a new three-year contract with improved pay, pension plan and health benefits.

The teachers have been working without a contract since Aug. 31. Negotiations between the union and the archdiocese reached a stalemate in December.

The teachers do not hold Pope Benedict responsible for the dispute, but striking during his visit will draw wider attention to the problem and pressure the archdiocese to make a deal, said Henry Kielkucki, union business manager.

"This is not against him," he said. "It's so people know what's going on. It will continue even after he leaves, if we still don't have a settlement."

Archdiocese officials said the most recent contract presented to the teachers is "very generous," and strongly criticized the decision to strike.

"If the teacher's union does seek to use the occasion of the visit of Pope Benedict XVI ... as an occasion of protest and as an occasion of division, I think that's an insult to Pope Benedict and an insult to the Catholic faithful of the Archdiocese of New York," said Joseph Zwilling, the spokesman for the New York archdiocese.

Pope Benedict plans to visit New York April 18-20, after spending a three days in Washington. The strike will begin at some point during the week of April 14, Kielkucki said.

More than 300 teachers participated in a sickout on Jan. 10, which did not achieve the union's desired result of a better offer from the archdiocese, he said.

The union's previous strike, in 2001, lasted 17 days. -- Nicole Neroulias

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