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'Lunacy' to think teachers strike will be settled today

Attendance light at safe haven sites; key points of contention remain unresolved

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Tribune reporters

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Addressing a large rally in the Loop, the head of the Chicago Teachers Union dashed hopes of settling the strike today and returning more than 350,000 children to the classroom.

"To say that the contract will be settled today is lunacy," CTU president Karen Lewis told cheering teachers.

School Board President David Vitale had indicated this morning, as negotiations resumed, that the two sides were close and even suggested there could be a settlement today.

But Lewis said the two sides remained far apart, noting that they have signed off on only six of the 49 articles in the contract. Main sticking points include evaluations and the rehiring of laid-off teachers.

Lewis told thousands of teachers at the rally that they were in this fight for the long haul.

"The assault on public education started here. It needs to end here," Lewis said, addressing the crowd as "brothers and sisters."

"We did not start this fight," Lewis said, touching off a chant from the crowd of "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Rahm Emanuel has got to go!"

Before heading back to the negotiations, Lewis said union leaders were "crossing the i's and dotting the t's" on a contract.

"I've got to go back to the silly part of my day. . .Y'all continue to have fun. Show each other some love," she said.

As Lewis returned to negotiations at a Michigan Avenue law office, she was asked about leaving through a back door to whip up strikers at the rally.

"You know what? We have a whole team. There's not one person doing negotiations," she said. "That's really

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silly."

As she waded through a media throng, Lewis said she left negotiations through a back door because "you guys are making things more tense than it needs to be."

She was asked if negotiations would go into the night. "I don't know, not too late I hope."

Any chance for a deal today?

"No," she said.

As the strike entered its second day, parents voiced their frustration as they dropped their children off at a "Play at the Park" program at Sheridan Park before going to work this morning.

Rachelle Cirrintano, who works at the University of Illinois at Chicago, worried about her 8-year-old son Rocco. The boy has a hard time adjusting to change, she explained. When she dropped him off this morning, he sat on a bench alone because he didn't know anyone.

"There was no reason to do this when they just got situated," Cirrintano said. "All the teachers should be let go for their irresponsibility to the children and their families."

Other parents said they sympathized with teachers, for now.

Judith Quintanilla, who brought her third- and fifth-grade daughters to Sheridan Park, said she's content supporting teachers if the strike doesn't last too long.

"It's really unfortunate," Quintanilla said. "The teachers do what they can to educate our children. Sometimes they use their own money to buy supplies for the kids."

But her daughters -- Leilani and Marlene Caballero, who transferred to public schools from charter schools this year -- both said they want to get back to school.

There were also stirrings of impatience among teachers as they marched and chanted in the Loop this morning.

"This could have been solved on day negative 5," complained Christopher Barker, a math teacher at George Manierre Elementary School.

But it doesn't mean Barker is ready to give in. "I don't have fears," Barker said. "I'm optimistic. . .I'll be here as long as I need to."

Joining him in front of Chicago Public Schools headquarters was Susan Hickey, a social worker for the district who worried about students most in need of help.

"These children need these services," Hickey said. "They need more quality services."

Her consolation was that there may be "a bit of a history lesson" here. "We're telling them, 'This is how you stand for your rights.' "

On the Near North Side, more than 60 teachers picketing outside George Manierre Elementary School

stopped their chanting and marching for a few minutes around 9:30 a.m. to sing "God Bless America" in honor of 9/11.

The group, many holding signs, maracas and tambourines and wearing red, then began singing "This Little Light of Mine" from a booklet with songs meant to inspire the union members.

"This is my life. This is generations and generations of teachers. We don't want to be in this picket line," said Barbara Relerford, a strike captain who teaches 3- to 5-year-olds at the Child Parent Center, a branch of Manierre. "Our hearts are in the classroom."

Teachers from at least four other CPS schools joined the staff at Manierre, where parents can drop their children off during the strike. As teachers sang and marched, children from inside the building peered out windows.

Former CPS teachers and their relatives helped lead and pump up the crowd, which chanted "Teachers rights under attack. What do we do? Stand up, fight back!"

CPS has improved its initial offer to teachers of a 2 percent base wage increase in each of the four years of the contract. The offer submitted to the union Sunday night offers teachers a series of base salary increases over four years, beginning with 3 percent in the first year and 2 percent in each of the next three years.

The average teacher in CPS has 13.7 years of experience and is paid about \$71,200, according to the Illinois State Board of Education.

The district's proposal also retains salary bumps for furthering education and for teacher experience, although the "step" increases for experience would be modified. CPS, which released an outline of its offer Sunday night, declined to give further details Monday.

The school board has made other concessions, including addressing a recall policy for teachers who had been laid off because of school closings, consolidations and turnarounds. The union has long sought such a policy, although officials said Sunday the district's plan does not go far enough. The union has not disclosed details of its contract proposals.

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