

Teachers' Strike Going Strong

Cars full of people scream up the road, hands out windows flashing the "V" for victory. Horns honk. Seneca Valley Senior High School's dean of students Bob Ceh nods and smiles in approval. He's standing on the curb in front of his school, laughing to his co-workers with his hands on his hips. "Yep, this certainly is a scene," he says, his hand floating out in grand gesture over the massive downhill slope of Seneca School Road.

For three days now Mr. Ceh and dozens of his cohorts, teachers from all three schools along the road, have been picketing up and down the school grounds, forming clusters and small meandering marches. Signs proclaiming "Fair Wages!" and "I Love To Teach, But I Need My Health", among hoards of other slogans, are on constant display. There are a few small weather tents set up along the woods-lined street, about a mile from any main road.

They are in for the long-haul. In a contract dispute that has been going on for over a year, the teachers are steadfast in their dedication to wait it out until their demands are at least partially met.

"All that we want is to be heard, listened to and our demands to be considered seriously," said Ceh. "We believe that if they [the school district] actually look at the facts and think about our perspective without any pre-suppositions and if they look at it without first making up their mind, then there's no way we can lose."

"There are a lot of kids in this district," continued Ceh. "These kids want to go to school. This thing needs to be resolved as soon as possible so we can get

them back in here.”

Ceh maintains that, despite the amount of time the dispute has gone without a solution, there is still plenty of middle ground to be forged between the two sides of the debate.

The school district’s lawyer, Tom King, offered only a brief statement regarding his client’s hope that an agreement will soon be reached.

Many students blame the teachers, not the administration, for keeping them out of school. “I think it sucks,” says Carl Sayti, a 14 year-old student of Seneca Valley Intermediate High School. “I don’t know, you see them out there protesting, but they make more than my dad does, and we do alright, and you don’t see my dad complaining. They’re the highest paid school district in the county.”

Republican state representative Daryl Metcalfe of the 12th district, where Seneca Valley School District is located, has even gone so far as to sponsor House Bills 1369 and 1901. If passed these bills will, by amending the Pennsylvania constitution, effectively outlaw teaching strikes.

Article 3, Section 14 of the Pennsylvania Constitution states that, “the General Assembly shall provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education to serve the needs of the Commonwealth.”

Mr. Metcalfe has been quoted by the Associated Press as saying, “It should be clear to anyone with common sense that 'thorough and efficient' does not mean allowing the education process to be disrupted by teacher strikes.”

A statement on Mr. Metcalfe’s website argues the precedence of such a bill. “Teacher strikes have been ruled unconstitutional three straight times by Pennsylvania county courts,” says the site. “In 1993, the PA Supreme Court overturned each of these lower court decisions by refusing to consider whether teacher strikes violate Article 3, Section 14 of the PA Constitution... [The bill]

would allow the legislature to exercise its respective Constitutional checks and balances authority to declare in no uncertain terms that teacher strikes and all other types of public school employee lockouts are both unconstitutional and illegal.”

“I think if that bill is what they’re going to do, that’s fine,” said Mr. Ceh. “We can’t do anything about it. But I’m certainly against it. If that’s going to happen then they have to give us some other tool as a way to have leverage in negotiations.”

For its part, the Metcalfe bill claims to be fairer to teachers than the current system. It guarantees, “mediation, fact-finding, arbitration, mandatory vote, mandatory negotiating and public transparency, to ensure fairness.” The bill also guarantees teachers not in agreement with the strike the ability to work.

“I don’t know if it’ll be fair if the bill passes,” said Mr. Ceh. “How it looks to me right now is that they want to make it as quick and convenient as possible. That’s all well and good but it would be easy for our viewpoints to be lost in the shuffle. If we don’t have leverage we can’t negotiate.”

Leverage is what the teachers are attempting to exercise. A meeting has been scheduled for October 17 between the Seneca Valley School board and representatives from the teacher’s union to which Mr. Ceh and the rest of the teachers belong.

“I think every time there’s a meeting there’s a chance for things to be worked out,” said Ceh. “But, most importantly, we’re very serious about what we need.” Teachers have been working without a contract since June of 2006. According to Mr. Ceh, the current pay-raise of four percent offered by the school board will be insufficient for many teachers to maintain their health care. Although he admits that as of now no teachers have had trouble with their health insurance, he maintains that, “the way it is now, in the future money will be taken away from us off the top. The cost of living will increase, but our pay won’t.”

In anticipation of the meeting, the teachers are in good spirits. They are constantly seen laughing and joking around. Many are busy sitting on the ground making new signs. They are often greeted by passers-by who sympathize with their cause. Just as often, though, the cars pass right by, their inhabitants scowling.

“I don’t think as many people are angry about it as it might seem,” said Mr. Ceh. “This thing is rough for everybody. Everybody only wants what they need.”