**Chicago teachers suspend strike, classes to resume Wednesday**

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Teachers agreed Tuesday to return to the classroom after more than a week on the picket lines in Chicago, ending a combative stalemate with Mayor Rahm Emanuel over evaluations and job security, two issues at the heart of efforts to reform the nation's public schools.

Union delegates voted overwhelmingly to suspend the strike after discussing a proposed contract settlement that had been on the table for days. Classes were to resume Wednesday.

Jubilant delegates poured out of a South Side union hall singing a song called "Solidarity Forever," honking horns and yelling, "We're going back." Most were eager to get to work and proud of a walkout that yielded results.

"I'm very excited. I miss my students. I'm relieved because I think this contract was better than what they offered," said America Olmedo, who teaches fourth- and fifth-grade bilingual classes. "They tried to take everything away."

Mayor Rahm Emanuel called the settlement "an honest compromise" that "means a new day and a new direction for the Chicago public schools."

He said the talks achieved goals that had eluded the district for more than a decade, including an extension of the school day, which had been among the nation's shortest, and a new teacher evaluation system.

"In past negotiations, taxpayers paid more, but our kids got less. This time, our taxpayers are paying less, and our kids are getting more," the mayor said, referring to provisions in the deal that he says will cut costs.

Union leaders pointed to concessions by the city on how closely teacher evaluations would be tied to student test scores and to better opportunities for teachers to retain their jobs if schools are closed by budget cuts.

The walkout, the first in Chicago in 25 years, shut down the nation's third-largest school district just days after 350,000 students had returned from summer vacation. Tens of thousands of parents were forced to find alternatives for idle children, including many whose neighborhoods have been wracked by gang violence in recent months.

Union President Karen Lewis said the union's 700-plus delegates responded to a voice vote with an estimated 98 percent in favor of reopening the schools.

"We said that we couldn't solve all the problems of the world with one contract," Lewis said. "And it was time to end the strike."

Tuesday's vote was not on the contract offer itself, but on whether to continue the strike. The contract will now be submitted to a vote by the full membership of more than 25,000 teachers.

The walkout was the first for a major American city in at least six years. And it drew national attention because it posed a high-profile test for teachers unions, which have seen their political influence threatened by a growing reform movement. Unions have pushed back against efforts to expand charter schools, use private companies to help with failing schools and link teacher evaluations to student test scores.

Chicago teachers took pride in the display of union muscle. Said elementary teacher Shay Porter: "We ignited the labor movement in Chicago."

The strike carried political implications, too, raising the risk of a protracted labor battle in President Barack Obama's hometown at the height of the fall campaign, with a prominent Democratic mayor and Obama's former chief of staff squarely in the middle. Emanuel's forceful demands for reform have angered the teachers.

The teachers walked out Sept. 10 after months of tense contract talks that for a time appeared to be headed toward a peaceful resolution.

Emanuel and the union agreed in July on a deal to implement the longer school day with a plan to hire back 477 teachers who had been laid off rather than pay regular teachers more to work longer hours. That raised hopes the contract would be settled before the start of fall classes, but bargaining stalled on other issues.

Emanuel decried the teachers' decision to leave classrooms, calling the walkout unnecessary and a "strike of choice."

Chicago's long history as a union stronghold seemed to work to the teachers' advantage. As they walked the picket lines, they were joined by many of the very people who were most inconvenienced by the work stoppage: parents who had to scramble to find babysitters or a supervised place for children to pass the time.

To win friends, the union engaged in something of a publicity campaign, telling parents repeatedly about problems with schools and the barriers that have made it more difficult to serve their kids. They described classrooms that are stifling hot without air conditioning, important books that are unavailable and supplies as basic as toilet paper that are sometimes in short supply.

Wilonda Cannon, a single mother in North Lawndale, a West Side neighborhood beset by gang shootings and poverty, was relieved to know her two youngest kids would be returning to their grammar school after spending much of the strike in the care of their grandfather.

Cannon hoped the deal would "get all the schools, or at least some of them, to a place where the atmosphere is more conducive to learning" and that it would put "more support structures in place for both the students and the teachers."

As the strike entered its second week, Emanuel turned to the courts, filing a lawsuit to force teachers to come back to work.

The clash upended a district in which the vast majority of students are poor and minority. Administrators staffed more than 140 schools with non-union workers so students who are dependent on school-provided meals would have a place to eat breakfast and lunch.

When the two sides met at the bargaining table, money was only part of the problem. With an average salary of $76,000, Chicago teachers are already among the highest-paid in the nation. The district's final proposal included an average 7 percent raise over three years, with additional raises for experience and education.

But the evaluations and job security measures stirred the most intense debate.

The union said the evaluation system was unfair because it relied too heavily on test scores and did not take into account outside factors that affect student performance such as poverty, violence and homelessness.

The union also pushed for a policy to give laid-off teachers first dibs on open jobs anywhere in the district. The district said that would prevent principals from hiring the best-qualified teachers.

When he took office last year, Emanuel inherited a school district facing a $700 million budget shortfall. Not long after, his administration rescinded 4 percent raises for teachers.