

CHICAGO TEACHERS UNION BITE THE BULLET, SETS STRIKE DATE: LAST MINUTE NEGOTIATIONS COULD SPELL TRUCE



After months of futile and seemingly wasted deliberations, the Chicago Teachers Union on Thursday said that they would begin their strike from Sept. 10. Yesterday, they had filed the mandatory 10-day strike notice. The eagerness and the desire to go ahead, come what may, is evident in that the day that they have chosen is the earliest possible day the union members could have chosen, signalling that they are not prepared to wait any longer. CTU President Karen Lewis said that the CPS is responsible for things coming to this stage and that they continued to drag their feet over the pay, class size and longer school day issues that resulted in a standoff that lasted for months. Lewis said, "We have said from the beginning, we're tired of being bullied, belittled and betrayed. We continue to be vilified and treated with disrespect." "We have been telling our parents and the city to prepare for this," Lewis said. "We do not want to strike but apparently the board does — because if they didn't, we wouldn't be in this situation where we are today." Even though chances are slim, the union could still reach an agreement, as negotiations are expected to continue, to avert the walkout. CPS CEO Jean-Claude Brizard said that her first priority was the children and that they should not lose out on their education. "Too much is at stake for our kids both inside and outside the classroom and that's why we're focused on reaching a fair contract for our teachers that keeps our kids in the classroom where they belong," she said. CPS has made an emergency plan, which they have called "Children First," under which, 145 of the city's schools will remain open for half days from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. It is also soliciting information from community organizations to suggest activities to keep the children engaged. Moreover, the city Board of Education authorized spending \$25 million if the strike does occur. If it does, it will be the first strike in a quarter century, the last time Chicago teachers went on strike was in 1987. The School district has sent information to parents on what programs will be available and what changes will be incorporated if the strike takes place. It is also planning to organize a telephonic town hall meeting for parents over the potential strike. The district said that it is putting everything else on hold to devote every minute till the Sept. 10 to find a solution. Even Lewis accepted that both sides are working to build community support towards a settlement. Community groups are getting frustrated and upset over the impasse and alleging that both are now indulging in egoism and self-centeredness and are insensitive to what happens to the students and feel it is all politically motivated. " (Parents) are so burnt out on this district and the sad state of public education in this city," Katten said. "I think a lot of them genuinely worry about the future." Brizard said that we must have the kids interests at heart and said that if kids were a priority then resorting to strike should never be a solution. She spelt out the gravity of the situation and the impact on the children saying that if last moment negotiations failed to spell truce, then "350,000 students will be taken out of their classroom, just as they're making progress with a Full School Day. Varsity sports for 11,000 student athletes will be suspended. More than 400,000 daily breakfasts and meals will no longer be served."