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CCEA leader: No strike discussed

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CASS CITY — Are teachers in this school district considering striking?

Superintendent Ron Wilson said a Michigan Education Association representative made such a threat last fall. He added recent actions by the MEA have indicated a strike could very well be in the plans, despite teacher strikes being illegal in Michigan.

A press release the Education Action Group (EAG) issued Thursday featured the headline "Cass City teachers threaten to strike — Union may hold community hostage over brand of health insurance."

Cass City Education Association President Kris Milligan, an elementary teacher, said there has never been discussion by the CCEA about the possibility of striking.

"I feel very uncomfortable with that word," she said. "We're not ready to go there, and I don't think we'd ever be ready to go there."

MEA Uniserv Director John Folsom, who has been bargaining on behalf of the CCEA, agreed with Milligan.

"Not one step has been taken (toward striking)," Folsom said.

The board of education and the CCEA have been negotiating since March 2008. The CCEA contract expired August 2008, Wilson said.

Wilson said a strike is the last thing he and the board want to see.

"I certainly hope it doesn't happen. It would be a black eye (on the district) and people would lose their jobs," he said.

The alleged threat

Wilson said Folsom made the threat to strike, and he only made the threat once. He said the threat was made last fall when he and Folsom met in Wilson's office before a negotiation meeting.

"Folsom and I discussed the differences in the board proposed insurance plan and the teachers' preferred MESSA plan," Wilson said in Thursday's EAG release. "Folsom asked why teachers should accept different health insurance. I responded by asking, 'Why should the board pay \$200,000 more than it has for MEA-owned health insurance?' Mr. Folsom's response was, 'The teachers will strike before they will give up MESSA insurance.'"

"I reminded Mr. Folsom that teacher strikes are an illegal activity. He said, 'Detroit got away with it.'"

Folsom denies ever making a threat to strike and said the union has never discussed a strike.

"Striking is illegal," he said.

Allegations of stall tactics

Wilson said the union requested a fact-finding hearing last year, but then a state mediator was brought in with the hopes of moving negotiations along. He said after four sessions, with the last one taking place in January, the mediator determined no progress was being made. He suggested a fact-finding hearing be scheduled.

Wilson said a conference call with an administrative law judge in late February resulted in a fact-finding hearing being scheduled. However, the date of the hearing raised a big red flag for Wilson.

"Folsom said he wasn't going to be available until July 23," he said. "This extends the negotiation process into the next school year."

He said after the hearing, the judge has 45 days to issue a decision, which is non-binding on either party. After that, the board and union have 60 days to come to a settlement. If this doesn't happen, the board can impose a contract on the CCEA. He said the CCEA's only recourse to this would be a strike.

Wilson said he and the board believe scheduling the fact-finding hearing in July is a tactic used by the MEA to stall negotiations. He said in an audio recording of an early February MEA conference in Detroit, an MEA representative was heard saying the longer a fact-finding process lasts, the longer it takes for a school board to impose a contract. The recording was released by the Education Action Group.

Folsom said Wilson's notion that the July date is a stall tactic is incorrect. He said it was scheduled in July because there is laundry list of issues that have yet to be discussed at the bargaining table, and the fact finding cannot take place until some of these issues are resolved.

"According to MERC rules, if there are more than 12 outstanding issues to be resolved, the fact finder has to remand negotiations back to mediation," Folsom said. "We have about 30 outstanding issues, and the board refuses to come to the bargaining table."

He said the issues include insurance, wages and contract language items.

Folsom said another reason the fact finding wasn't scheduled until July is because of people's availability. He said it can take awhile to find a time when everyone is available.

EAG's involvement

In February, Wilson contacted EAG with health insurance cost concerns, wanting to know whom he should contact at the state level. He started talking about the contract negotiations and mentioned the strike threat.

"They told me I should take this information to the general public," Wilson said.

He sent EAG some information, and EAG created a press release, which was sent to the Huron Daily Tribune Thursday. According to EAG, the release was provided at no charge to the district.

Following its release, the Cass City Board of Education released a statement from President Doug Lautner.

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"While involved in collective bargaining, it is very disturbing to me that there would be the threat of an illegal strike by the teaching staff," Lautner stated. "Such an action would do nothing but endanger their jobs, damage the Cass City School District, and do harm to the students we care so much about. It is my hope the CCEA would denounce such tactics and seek a quick end to these negotiations by following the established legal bargaining procedures."

Wilson said the combination of the threat, the July 23 fact-finding hearing date, and what was said at the MEA conference in Detroit, led to the EAG press release and Lautner's statement.

"The board isn't going to be silent anymore," he said. "The union isn't going to bully us into a settlement ... I believe the union is bargaining in bad faith by threatening to walk out if they don't get their way."

Wilson said the board of education considered filing an unfair labor practice complaint against the MEA last fall. However, he said this would require the district to spend funds that already are in short supply.

Folsom said Wilson and the board are trying to place attention on something other than their unwillingness to negotiate.

"(The press releases) are a desperate attempt on the board's part to deflect the issues. The issue is (the board) refuses to bargain at the bargaining table," he said.

Milligan said the CCEA is ready to bargain at any time.

"There is a lot of misinformation out there (regarding a threat to strike)," she said.

According to EAG, only one public school district in Michigan, outside of Detroit, has experienced a teachers strike since 1993. That was the Wayne-Westland district in western Wayne County, where teachers had a four-day walkout last fall. Despite strikes being illegal in Michigan, teachers in the Detroit and Wayne-Westland districts were not penalized for striking.

Wilson said he's not sure why teachers in these districts were able to strike without having any consequences.

"The law says (strikes are illegal), but you need a judge to enforce it," he said.