

EDUCATION: Striking teachers report feeling like victims of propaganda machines, not knowing the full story or who to believe

Walking the line and caught in the middle

BY JENNIFER BROWN
STAFF WRITER

The strike vote is four days away, but many public elementary teachers in York Region are scratching their heads about how they got to this point.

Teachers have different opinions about what the big issues are, but the common complaint is they don't feel they have all the answers and they don't know who to believe.

"There's a huge mix — everyone is frustrated and just wants to know the bottom line," said one Grade 8 teacher who asked to remain anonymous. "The propaganda machine is in full tilt and the truth lies somewhere between there. Many want to know why we are going directly to a strike vote."

Many teachers were reluctant to let their names be published, claiming they feared disciplinary action either by their union or the school board.

And with union officials adamant that no talks will occur before Monday's strike vote, teachers are powerless to do anything but vote.

But local union president Pam Gillan said the decision to move towards a strike vote was made to strengthen the union's position with the school board.

"What we had was the board's position when we left for mediation and there was no indication they would move from that position," Gillan said. "It was a decision by the provincial people we would have to do this to move it along. But I know there is a feeling among the membership that we should have had an offer."

The union has been holding information meetings for teachers all week leading up to Monday's vote. A final count won't be known until Wednesday.

Randall Public School teacher Steve Bull said the big issue is a lack of trust, with not only the board but the union as well. Following the last round of negotiations in 1996, teachers felt they had been misled by many.

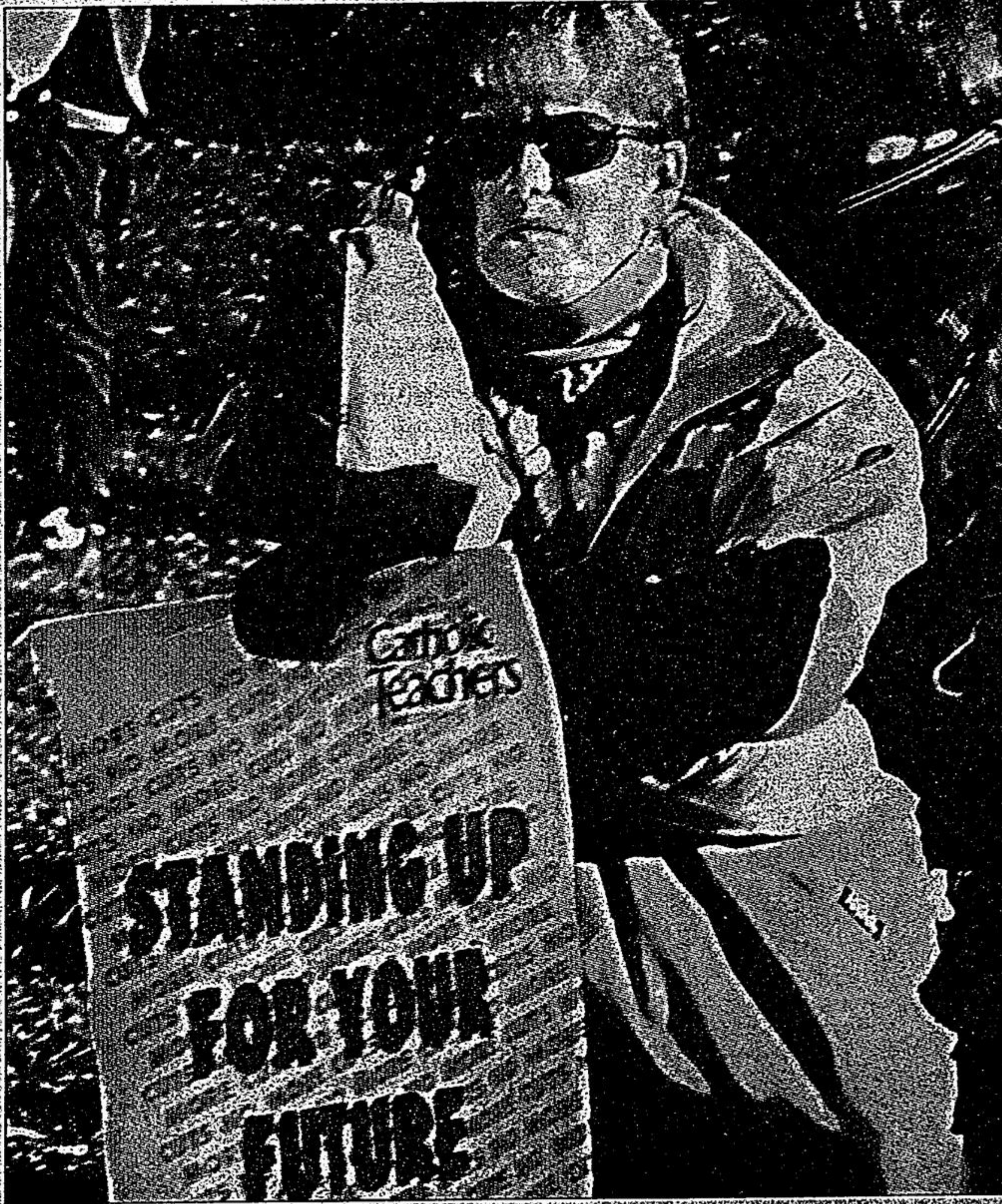
"When we concluded negotiations last time and did a survey with the membership, lack of trust with the board was the number one issue," he said.

There were also complaints against the federation. Some felt the deal didn't rectify the problem and there was a complete lack of trust when the board stripped out prep time — that carries over.

Acknowledging the board's hands are tied this time around, Bull blames the province for underfunding the system.

He has a class of 36 Grade 8 students at his Markham school this year — well over the province's much-touted average of 25.

Bull said teachers have deep concerns about the board's opening position, which reserves the right to amend working condi-



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Sandee Fennell, a striking teacher with York Region's Catholic board, urges her public school colleagues to join her on the picket line.

tions and salary at its discretion.

But board officials now insist they would drop that request if talks resume.

For some teachers, it's a case of once bitten, twice shy. Two years ago, teachers delivered an 80-per cent strike mandate to the union, but the strike was called off when a last-minute deal was reached.

In that deal, teachers were disappointed to learn the union had agreed to reduce prep time from 200 minutes a week to 160 minutes.

Aurora Catholic teacher Sandee Fennell said her public board colleagues must find the courage to join the fight, arguing the issues are the same for all boards.

"I think it's the same issues, just a differ-

ent set of people. They are not as politically active and I don't find the elementary teachers as well informed or militant," said Fennell, who has been walking the picket line for three weeks now.

But many public board teachers indicated this week they would accept a reduction in prep time to 120 minutes a week.

One 14-year veteran teacher said he is happy with his class of 31 students — even though it's larger than was promised by the province. And he would "sadly" agree to 120 minutes of prep time.

Other issues include changes to benefit packages and a three-year restriction on how long a teacher can serve as a union representative.

Union, board at stalemate over hiring

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get a final settlement. We were committed to do some work, but nothing happened as soon as we started moving towards any substantial issues in the elementary and secondary panels.

"It was like walking into a quagmire. The closer we got to the core, the more we got bogged down," he added.

"I looked at the board and they were not prepared to deal."

But board vice-chairperson Elizabeth Crowe said the first objective on Tuesday was to get the students back in school as soon as possible — and that could be achieved with an interim or complete settlement.

However, she acknowledged the strike will continue until the union accepts the board's financial figures and realizes there is no money available to hire additional teachers or commit to a large salary hike.

"We actually told the union we'd prefer rotating strikes in order to get the kids in the class, but that was not acceptable to them," Crowe said.

"We offered to try to address all the elementary issues and that was not acceptable either."

Admitting that other boards have settled on six teaching periods for high school instructors, Crowe said that solution only becomes possible after the unions made substantial contract concessions.

"As long as the teachers have a salary demand on the table, we can't even look at it."

Despite being off the job for the 12th consecutive day, teachers at yesterday's protest said they're prepared to remain on strike until all the issues are resolved.

"Sacrifices are made. If the cause is good, you sacrifice," said Charles Chambers, a special education teacher at Holy Cross Catholic High School in Woodbridge.

"The teachers should be in the classroom, but the school board does not want to settle. This could have been avoided because they have the money to make it work. The board should be talking to us instead of waiting for the government to legislate us back to work."

According to Chambers, the picket lines are also getting dangerous.

He cited an incident early yesterday in which a car nearly hit several protesting teachers.

"Someone tried to ram through the line," he said. "The longer it goes, somebody is going to get hurt."



MARSHALL JARVIS

OECTA president lends support to York Region rally

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do!



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PHARMASAVE Health Centre

GRAND OPENING
DRAW WINNERS

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 - 2nd ~ Zahid Zivojevic
 - 3rd ~ Mary Barker
 - 4th ~ Molly Cuttridge
 - 5th ~ Doris Scott
 - 6th ~ Bill Topham
- 20 Fred Varley Dr., Unionville
944-8800