

Debate focuses on classroom instruction

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step, according to member Heidi Kreiner-Ley.

"My spin on it is, I'm here for the kids," the Richmond Hill mother of two said. "Children are on top of the totem pole. They are the ones you have to hold in the highest regard."

Kreiner-Ley said she can only hope officials will reach a settlement before Aug. 31, when all teacher collective agreements in Ontario expire.

Nearly 130,000 teachers across Ontario staged an illegal strike three years ago to protest Bill 160, the province's education reform law.

The province recently announced it will enact a regulation that would force teachers to follow a much stricter definition of instructional time under the bill. Ecker has threatened to force teachers to supervise extracurricular activities if they resist the plan through a work-to-rule campaign.

Gerry Harrison, president of the OSSTF's York Region branch, has said the regulation would handcuff school boards and their unions when it comes time to negotiate new teacher contracts.

Despite that, he's hopeful local teachers and school boards can avoid the troubles of the past.

Harrison said the OSSTF's silent protest does not indicate relations between unions and the province are deteriorating.

"That was not a meeting for dialogue, where the government was going to listen to us and change policy," he explained.

GROUP CRITICIZED

"She (Ecker) was there to deliver the Tory agenda."

Harrison admitted the system inevitably produces conflict, but said there are safeguards to ensure unions and boards are trying to reach a deal at contract time. Labour board officials can charge either side with bad faith bargaining, he noted.

Bill Crothers, chairperson of the York Region public school board, criticized the parent group for making accusations against board and union officials.

"Right now the relationships we have with our teachers are better than they have been in a long time," he said.

Elizabeth Crowe, chairperson of the York Catholic board, said she doesn't foresee a teacher strike.

She estimated the board has met with the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association's York Region branch 10 times and hopes the two sides can reach a deal in a few weeks.

"We've been involved in negotiations for about a month now and things have been progressing very well," she said.

Crowe noted negotiators are trying a new method of discussing issues rather than passing slips of paper across the bargaining table to state their positions. Inor Baczynsky, branch president, said he doesn't foresee a strike because relations between board and union are improving.

Local Catholic teachers conducted a month-long legal strike in 1998 after they could not reach a deal with the board on changes to class and preparation time.

"It's really hard for the membership to begin trusting," Baczynsky said.

Teachers want out of unions

Educators for Choice demand new legislation allowing them to opt out

BY GIANNI COLAVECCHIA
Staff Writer

The leader of a new group of teachers fighting against being forced to join a union says he expects many local educators will join his cause.

Terry Ross says he has talked with many teachers in York Region who have expressed interest in joining his group, Educators for Choice.

The group gave its first news conference earlier this month to let parents and educators across Ontario know it wants the province to create legislation that would give new teachers the right to stay out of a union if they choose.

Current rules dictate that people entering the teaching profession must join one of Ontario's various teacher unions.

"Our primary concern is to get the freedom of choice," Ross, the group's executive director, said.

The group is also calling for an end to teacher strikes, which it says have significantly hurt students in the past.

Ross, a 53-year-old Oakville teacher with a child in the school system, said he's been told 1,000 instructors plan to join his group.

A recent check showed the group's website, www.educatorsforchoice.com,

had received nearly that many hits but Ross was unable to provide an official tally of who, if anyone, has joined.

Ross belongs to the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario but said he doesn't fear it will punish him for starting his group.

He said officials threatened him with "all kinds of things" after a run-in with the union in the mid-1980s, but in the end, simply prohibited him from holding office within their union for five years.

'There's a lot of fear in the ranks of teachers. The sanctions are very real and severe.'

Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms permits freedom of speech and there is no union bylaw that prohibits teachers from belonging to an advocacy group, he noted.

But there have been cases in which Ontario teacher unions have punished their members for unorthodox behavior.

That's a problem because many teachers want to break away from their unions but fear reprisals, according to John Martin of Children First in Education, a local group that supports the idea of allowing teachers to opt out of unions.

"There's a lot of fear in the ranks of teachers. The sanctions are very real and severe," Martin said.

He admitted getting provincial officials to approve the idea will be an uphill battle.

Vaughan-King-Aurora MPP Al Palladini said current legislation could help.

The province's Bill gives people the right to vote on whether they want to be part of a trade union and requires all strike votes to be taken by secret ballot.

"Under Bill 7, I believe that they have the opportunity to do something about it," Palladini said.

But teacher unions probably aren't covered by the bill, according to Thornhill MPP Tina Molinari.

She wouldn't say whether the province was likely to give teachers the right to opt out of unions.

"We'd have to see what proposal they would be putting forward," she said.

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