

# ...A look-back at the almost-strike

(From Page 5)

but the actual event — close to 3,000 teachers assembled Feb. 5 in the Schnitzer Auditorium — exceeded all expectations. After discussion, members started chanting demanding a vote, and only a small handful said they did not want to strike.

Then, a week before the strike, the district directed teachers to remove their belongings from the classroom. But if that was intended to frighten or demoralize, it had the opposite effect. Teachers made a collective show of walking out together with boxes full of their belongings.

Meanwhile, public support for teachers was massive and growing by the day as the strike neared.

A group of state legislators wrote a letter to the district, saying they'd voted to give the district additional funds to hire more teachers, not put the money in reserve as the district was planning to do.

Faith leaders from 20 denominations wrote a letter to the district, pledging to open their facilities and congregations so that primary schoolchildren would have a place to go during the strike.

Plans were in the works for unionized teachers elsewhere — from North Clackamas and David Douglas school districts to Los Angeles and Chicago — to “adopt” striking schools and deliver messages of solidarity, as well as food and beverages to the picket line.

As many as 2,000 high school students took part in protests to demand the district settle — even walking out

of school at Cleveland, Jefferson, Roosevelt, Wilson, and other high schools. A high school student group called Portland Student Union formed to organize student support, declaring “if teachers strike, we strike too.” And some high school students were getting ready to coordinate baby-sitting for younger students, to help them stay out of struck schools.

“It made it very difficult for the district to claim they were doing this in the interest of students,” Sanchez said, “when you had actual real living students telling them that our working conditions are their learning conditions.”

Sullivan said the student walkouts also emboldened the teachers, who had no experience of striking. And they solidified the notion that teachers wouldn't be abandoning their students by walking out; students were actually counting on them to take a risk in order to deliver good schools.

Entirely outside of the teachers union, solidarity groups of parents and activists were forming, organizing public demonstrations, and making private plans to share daycare in the event of a strike. Parent groups across the city created Facebook pages and message boards to connect families with babysitters, tutors and community organizations. And parents got very vocal with the district. Buel, the PPS Board member, said he got maybe 200 emails from teachers and parents in the months leading up to the showdown, but as many as 800 in the final three or four days — an avalanche of public reaction saying “stop this strike from

happening.”

“[The district] had spent so much money and energy trying to attack us,” Sullivan said, “and they saw they were no longer winning.”

The strike was to begin Thursday, Feb. 20. The district's plan was to close schools early on Wednesday, and stay closed Thursday and Friday while it trained replacements for a Monday re-opening. But union leaders got wind of a scab training planned at mothballed Marshall High School and made plans for teachers to picket, joined by student and community supporters, before heading downtown for a mass rally at Pioneer Courthouse Square.

“We were ready to go out and run a Chicago-style strike,” Sanchez said. “I think that's what ultimately the district feared the most.”

Sullivan and Sanchez say PAT is indebted to the example of Chicago teachers, who waged a carefully prepared and largely successful strike in September 2012. Chicago teachers prioritized class size, and demonstrated the link between teachers and students interests, making it harder for detractors to spin a narrative about greedy teachers. Portland teachers' “Schools Portland Students Deserve” campaign was lifted right out of “Schools Chicago Students Deserve.”

“It's not enough to give people something to fight against,” Sanchez said. “They have to have something to fight for.”

But just because PAT got a favorable settlement doesn't mean it's ready to demobilize, Sullivan said: There are

bigger fights ahead.

Sullivan said Portland teachers are ready to join a national movement pushing back against increased emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing. One idea is for the union to organize a series of forums on “the schools our students deserve.”

PAT members also plan to show up during upcoming district budget hearings. Sullivan said during contract negotiations the administration would often tell the union, “this is an important conversation, but it's a budget conversation.” “150 teachers? That's easy for them,” Sullivan said. “There should be 300 more teachers. If you saw the budget, they could easily have that many.”

The union would also be in a much better position if it had a supportive school board that it could unite with to press the Oregon Legislature for better funding and to reject corporate-style reforms. Most of the current school board members had PAT's endorsement, and yet they stood by as the administration paid an anti-union consultant \$15,000 a month and pursued a strategy of public shaming, provocation, intimidation and demands for concessions. Sullivan wouldn't discuss specific plans, but it's clear PAT will be interested in the 2015 school board elections.

“This was a step forward,” Sullivan said. “We have a marathon in front of us.”

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