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Cardinal Egan's Test: Is Teachers' Strike Really a Rebellion?

Budget-Cutting Head of Archdiocese Holds Line; Says Catholic Teachers' Union Boss MacDonald, 'We Really Have a Cardinal Who Does Not Care'

BY JOSH BENSON

When Cardinal Edward Egan took up residence on Madison Avenue last year, he brought with him a reputation as a fiscal disciplinarian who could bring order to a sprawling and deficit-ridden Archdiocese of New York. He's lived up to his billing, laying off workers at the archdiocese's headquarters on First Avenue, scaling back the archdiocesan newspaper from a weekly to a monthly, closing several schools and taking a tough stand in contract talks with the Catholic schoolteachers' union.

Now more than a year into his tenure, the Cardinal is about to face a full-scale rebellion and a public-relations nightmare as he grapples with an annual deficit estimated at $20 million. With teachers at 10 Catholic high schools already walking picket lines, a sick-out at three other high schools is on the verge of mushrooming into a full-fledged strike that could shut down the archdiocese's 238 elementary schools and 55 high schools, affecting more than 100,000 students. And looming in the background is the near certainty of more school closings and a possible confrontation with the archdiocese's health-care workers, who staff 17 church-run hospitals and medical facilities in one of the country's largest health-care systems.

With the 377-member Lay Faculty Association out of the classroom and staging demonstrations outside the cardinal's midtown residence, the 3,600-member Federation of Catholic Teachers is preparing to join the association's strike. Michele MacDonald, the president of the union, told *The Observer* that the union's executive board very likely will call for a strike vote by members on Dec. 5.

"I would assume that we will recommend a strike if I don't see any movement by the archdiocese," said Ms. MacDonald, a grandmother and former nun who has taught in Catholic schools on Staten Island for the past 27 years. "The archdiocese is forcing us to take that route. Cardinal Egan feels he has a deficit to satisfy, and he's trying to do it on the backs of the teachers." Both Catholic school unions have been without a contract since September. The archdiocese reportedly has offered a 2 percent annual raise, but the teachers say the increase in pay would be more than offset by a 20 percent increase in the out-of-pocket costs of a new health plan. The union wants a larger wage increase—although it hasn't specified how much larger—and wants to keep the current health plan.



CARDINAL EDWARD EGAN

Monsignor Peter G Finn, rector of St Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers and a former spokesman for the archdiocese, defended the cardinal's stance. "The church and Cardinal Egan and everyone else are sharing in the pressures of the economic recession that we're in," he said. "We're all trying to deal with this as best we can."

Joseph Zwilling, a spokesman for the

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