

Union officials accept deal to end Minnesota state workers strike

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16 October 2001

Minnesota state government and union officials reached tentative agreements Sunday, October 14, as 24,000 state workers concluded their second week in the largest strike in Minnesota's history.

State workers came under fierce attack by the national media for striking as the administration of George W. Bush prepared and unleashed war against Afghanistan. Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura used radio interviews and talk shows to rant against the workers for striking at a time of national crisis, dispatching 1,000 National Guardsmen to be used as strikebreakers. At one point he told strikers if they didn't like their jobs they should quit and work somewhere else. He also threatened if a settlement were reached that went beyond budget constraints he would retaliate by slashing the jobs of workers to rebalance the state ledger.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 6, which represents some 19,000 workers, had bargained for 5 percent in each year of a two-year agreement. But ultimately AFSCME settled for 3.5 percent per year. Further details are not available.

The Minnesota Association of Professional Employees (MAPE), representing 10,500 workers, was demanding 4.5 percent per year in their two-year agreement against the state's original offer of 2 percent per year and a second offer of 4 percent over two years. But MAPE also climbed down to 3 percent per year. According to MAPE Executive Director Jim Monroe, the wage proposal is partially funded by canceling discretionary step increases, a form of merit pay, throughout 2002. In what is supposed to be an enticement to accept the agreement, workers are being offered a meager one-time lump sum payment of \$250.

In terms of health-care issues, Monroe announced

MAPE had accepted the "advantage" program pushed by state negotiators that had galvanized workers to go on strike in the first place, although it is claimed the state made concessions.

Although it was not mentioned, whatever "concessions" the state might have made to the unions is also being partly financed by money saved as a result of not paying state workers' salaries during the strike.

At a MAPE press conference union officials acknowledged that the state had only added \$3 million to its offer, or about \$285 per MAPE striker. Monroe added, "You can't really put a worth value on a strike.... While it was over wages and insurance costs, the driving force was really coalesced into a whole question of dignity, respect and recognition for the state's workers."

MAPE President Deb Shadegg said, "We really have very little control when it comes to getting management to make the right move at the right time." MAPE officials then repeated their timeworn claim that their only recourse was to elect more Democrats in the future.

When asked what led to a settlement, Monroe responded, "State government was coming to a grinding halt in its ability to serve the citizens of this state." In other words, union officials called off the strike just at the point it became most effective.

There is no question that the powers-that-be were frustrated by the refusal of state workers to be cowed by charges they were undermining national unity. They hoped that the media onslaught would cause a considerable number of workers to cross picket lines. When 23,000 turned out on the first day, a section of the economic and political establishment in the state realized the attempts to intimidate workers with charges they were unpatriotic had failed and they would have to

rely on the trade union bureaucracy to wrap up the strike.

At the end of the first week of the strike the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*—which has a long history of hostility to the working class dating back to the socialist-led labor struggles of the 1930s and '40s—wrote in an editorial, “Ventura is a hothead when cooler heads should prevail.” A major concern expressed by the newspaper was that Ventura’s bullying might discredit the efforts of big business to impose its dictates on the working class through appeals to national unity and sacrifice in times of war.

As new talks opened, the *Star Tribune* editorialized, “It’s heartening to see bargaining resume today.... That hope had begun to fade in recent days, as both sides in the labor dispute seemed to dig in. Even the beginning of US military action in Afghanistan did not appear to make the unions or the Ventura administration more eager to resolve their differences and get state government functioning normally again.”

The editorial called for compromise. But it also made sure that the AFSCME and MAPE leadership understood its position: “The unions must realize that wage and benefit demands that may have been reasonable only two months ago seem unrealistic now.”

The labor bureaucracy ordered strikers back to work Monday. At the same time, they have delayed a vote on the contract for several weeks, moving it closer to the holiday season. All this is aimed at deflating the solidarity of the strikers and laying the groundwork for a new round of propaganda that will seek to brand the strikers as unreasonable if they do not accept the tentative agreement.



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