

St. Paul public school teachers to vote for strike authorization

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The 23-member executive board of the St. Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFT), Local 28 of the American Federation of Teachers, met February 10 and voted unanimously to schedule a strike authorization vote for 3,200 teachers in Minnesota's largest urban public school district. The teachers will vote on the walkout at a yet to be announced venue on Monday, February 24.

The last two-year contract for Minnesota teachers expired in the spring of 2013, and approximately 157 of the 334 state public school districts have settled and signed contracts. Of some 27 grievances between the St. Paul teachers local and the St. Paul School District (SPPS), 13 have been settled to the satisfaction of the union.

Items remaining on the list for contract resolution include capping class sizes to 22 students, reduction of standardized testing, increased access to Pre-K education and hiring more in-school staff such as librarians, nurses and social worker/counselors.

The average class size in the St. Paul public school district is 25 students and the Twin Cities average is 27. Approximately 39,000 students are enrolled in the SPPS.

With the announcement by Mary Cathryn Ricker, president of the union, that a strike vote would occur later in February, St. Paul schools superintendent Valeria Silva responded that all St. Paul public schools would be closed if the teachers vote to walk out. Silva also said that all before-and-after school activities for all students and the public would cease, including sports events, and that some 2,500 non-teacher workers would be furloughed.

Silva announced that the district does not have the resources, presumably meaning a roster of strikebreaking teacher substitutes, with which to

menace the jobs of the educators currently working without a contract.

School officials also announced at the district web site that they would cancel all community education classes and that for the duration of the strike they would close the SPPS child care program called the Discovery Club.

In September 2013, Minnesota state mediators became involved in union and school district negotiations, with two more meetings scheduled for February 20 and March 6. The union and school district have submitted requests to the state mediation bureau for increased negotiation sessions before the February 24 membership vote.

Under Minnesota state law, the school district must be given 10 business days' notice of a decision by the teachers to strike. On the Local 28 web site, the union announced the strike could begin any time after the elapse of the 10-day notice.

The SPFT and the school district are also at odds over wages and benefits, the union requesting an 11.4 percent increase over two years and the school district offering 6.5 percent.

St. Paul teachers voted for a strike in 1989, which was canceled at the last minute due to an intervention by St. Paul's Democratic Party mayor at the time, George Latimer. The most recent Minnesota teachers strike occurred in 2005, when 86 teachers walked out in the Crosby-Ironton district for six weeks, the second longest teachers strike in state history. Educators from St. Paul also launched the first teachers strike in US history in 1946.

The first week of this month, as Superintendent Silva delivered an annual status report for the St. Paul district, over 3,000 teachers and staff rallied at more than fifty schools in support of the proposals for

improved working conditions.

With the announcement of a strike vote set for later this month, the Twin Cities media, union officials, and St. Paul academics have held up the settlement of the nine-day Chicago teachers strike in September 2012 as a model for education advancement. To quote one source, “education union officials in the windy city found a way to frame the issues.”

The current St. Paul Local 28 president Ricker in fact delivered a speech at a Chicago strike rally, and said at the time that the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) proposals had “resonated with teachers in St. Paul.”

However, both the mass media and SPFT union officials, including Ricker, omit any mention of the closure of 50 Chicago public schools in the 2013 follow-up to the strike settlement, accompanied by the loss of some 4,000 teachers and staff jobs, cuts in teachers’ pay and the concurrent increase in the opening of “replacement” for-profit charter schools, of which there are presently 125 in Chicago. In addition, instruction in foreign languages and the arts was slashed.

Teachers in the charter schools of Chicago earn about \$20,000 less per year than public school teachers. These teachers have been unionized by the Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff (ACTS). The parent union of ACTS is the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which is also the parent union of the CTU. The AFT makes generous donations from union funds to the Democratic Party.

While the Twin Cities media and teachers unions hold up the Chicago settlement as a model for the future, they also do not mention the attack on Illinois state workers and teachers pensions, poised for sacking as a result of the CTU sellout.

The St. Paul union and public school officials are aware of seething discontent over working conditions in the classrooms of the Twin Cities. For example, frustrated teachers in the Anoka-Hennepin district north of Minneapolis have stopped after-hours work, including checking emails, refining lesson plans and after-school events.

The SPFT also remains very aware, and wary, of the teachers’ growing impatience with the consequences of state and federal cutbacks for public education, which they, the union bureaucrats, have helped impose on the teachers, students and their families.

For the last several years, teachers have also been

compelled under Obama’s reactionary Race to the Top federal mandate to orient their teaching to standardized testing they must administer regularly. They are aware that critical hours for genuine teaching are lost to testing processes and that the tests are to be used as an attack on public education. The test results will be used to fire teachers and close public schools.



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