

# Defend the social right to public education: Oppose St. Paul Federation of Teachers’ sellout contract!

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The agreement reached between the St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS) and the St. Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFT) last week should be rejected and teachers should make immediate preparations for a struggle to defend not merely wages and school conditions, but the social right to public education as a whole.

Although the union and the administration are keeping details hidden until immediately before the informational meeting, one thing is certain: any deal worked out between the union executives, Democratic Party politicians and district officials behind the backs of teachers cannot produce anything but further setbacks.

After nine months of rejecting teacher demands for smaller class-sizes, more librarians, counselors, and nurses, increased access to Pre-K education, and a reduction in standardized testing, SPPS Superintendent Valeria Silva issued an ecstatic response to the deal.

Democratic Mayor Chris Coleman, who oversaw hundreds of teacher and staff layoffs during his second-term in office, added his voice, saying he “could not be more pleased” with the tentative agreement.

Appearing side-by-side with Silva was SPFT president Mary Cathryn Ricker, who praised the deal, saying she was “grateful” to “the district’s bargaining team.”

Grateful for what, exactly?

School board officials and local politicians have spent the last several weeks preparing to break a strike and have tried to incite parents against teachers. Last week, Silva and SPPS board chairwoman Mary Doran (who was endorsed by SPFT) co-authored a letter warning parents that their children would be denied subsidized meals if the teachers walked out.

The Democratic Party even mobilized the NAACP to suggest that a strike would unfairly target minority students. Jeffrey Martin, president of the St. Paul branch, denounced teachers for considering striking “on the backs of our children” and called on Democratic Governor Mark Dayton to prevent a walkout.

But big business politicians and their corporate backers have no right to blame teachers for hurting students—they are the ones who have orchestrated decades of budget cuts, teacher layoffs and other attacks on public education. Every one of them claims there are no resources for smaller classes and improved schools even as trillions are found for bank bailouts, corporate tax cuts, and subsidies to for-profit charter schools.

The attack on public education is being spearheaded by the Obama administration. The White House has starved public schools of funding, while it uses Race to the Top and other schemes to tie teacher wages and benefits to standardized tests, close schools, layoff teachers, and funnel even more public money to private charter operators. Since Obama took office nearly 330,000 teachers and other public school employees have lost their jobs, 4,000 public schools have been closed, and the number of students enrolled in charter schools has doubled.

The political establishment, the media, and the unions have sought to create the appearance that St. Paul teachers are isolated from the population. In fact, the opposite is true. There exists broad support among students, parents, and the working class as a whole for a real fight to defend public education and stop the unrelenting attacks on jobs, living standards and social

rights.

But the SPFT and its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers, are the biggest obstacles to such a struggle. AFT President Randi Weingarten and other union executives have such close ties to the Obama administration that they fear any struggle in defense of public education might disrupt their cozy relations with the Democratic Party. The union executives share the pro-business outlook of the president and his “school reform” agenda, and ask only that they be partners in implementing these anti-teacher measures.

The role of the AFT was made clear during last year’s bitter nine-day strike in Chicago when 26,000 teachers walked out in defense of public education. The Chicago Teachers Union and AFT quickly shut down the strike before it could develop into a political confrontation with Mayor Rahm Emanuel—Obama’s former White House chief of staff—or disrupt the president’s reelection campaign.

The betrayal of the strike was devastating: the union gave Emanuel the green light to close 50 schools and lay off 3,500 teachers and school workers. As a reward for this sellout, an AFT-affiliated union was given the franchise to “organize” low-paid teachers at the charter schools run by one of Emanuel’s closest supporters.

Mayor Coleman lied when he told the *Star Tribune* last week that, “St. Paul has a long history of peaceful labor relations.” In fact, none of the gains made by the working class over the last century were won without struggle.

The teachers of St. Paul made history when they fought the first teachers strike in American history during the cold winter of 1946. Then, under the slogan of “strike for better schools,” the teachers fought against the newly formed Democratic Farmer-Labor Party for a reduction in class sizes, repairs to dilapidated school buildings, higher wages and benefits, and free textbooks for working class students.

The teachers were threatened with mass firings and police repression during the month-long strike of 1946, but their pickets were joined by parents, students, and workers from across the Twin Cities who remembered the police violence used against striking coal-drivers during the 1934 Minneapolis general strike, which was led by the Trotskyist movement.

Inspired by the teachers in St. Paul, a wave of rolling

teacher strikes forced school districts across the country to improve school conditions and to expand access to public education. In the two years following the St. Paul teachers strike, 12,000 teachers in 48 cities went on strike.

Today the ruling elite is determined to take everything away and turn the clock backwards to the days when only the sons and daughters of the wealthy had access to decent schools.

Across the country, teachers in places like Portland, Oregon and at the University of Illinois, Chicago are mobilizing in defense of public education, while half of public school districts in Minnesota are currently operating without a contract. In order to unite these struggles and reach out more broadly to every section of the working class, however, teachers need new organizations of struggle, independent of the trade unions and the Democratic Party.

Above all, the struggle to defend public education requires a *political struggle* to reorganize how society’s resources are controlled and allocated in a democratic and egalitarian manner. But since the Democrats and Republicans are the bought-and-paid for representatives of the super-rich, the working class must organize its own mass political party in order to break the grip of the corporate and financial elite. This requires the building of a socialist party whose aim is to redistribute society’s wealth and to ensure that the social rights to decent and secure jobs, health care, housing, and access to high quality education and culture are available for all.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on teachers to reject the SPFT/SPPS proposed contract and elect rank-and-file committees consisting of the most trusted and militant teachers. These committees—not the trade union apparatus—must be the focal point for an appeal to enlist the broadest layers of the working class in defense of the St. Paul teachers and the right to public education.



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