

# St. Paul, Minnesota teachers face Tuesday strike deadline

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Nearly 3,700 teachers and support staff in St. Paul, Minnesota could go on strike Tuesday if union and school district officials fail to reach an agreement on wages, class sizes, staffing levels and other demands. A teacher strike in the 39,000-student school district would be the first in the city since 1946.

On January 31, 85 percent of the 3,100 teachers employed by the St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS) district voted for a strike. Four hundred educational assistants voted by 90 percent to walk out, and 170 community service professionals backed a strike with an 80 percent vote. Following the strike vote authorization, a notice of intent to strike issued the day after began a ten-day countdown to strike.

Educators are angry over long-eroding teaching conditions and falling living standards. Maximum class sizes accepted by the St. Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFT) in the last contract in 2016 were as large as 37 students per class for high schools, and 35 students per class for middle school (grades 6-8). The school district, which claims to have a projected \$27 million budget, has opposed any significant improvements in pay or conditions.

The SPFT is calling for a reduction in the class sizes by two students per teacher, but the SPPS has refused, saying this would cost \$91 million. After accepting previous pay freezes and cuts, the SPFT is proposing a meager 2.5 percent annual wage increase, but the district has countered saying it can only afford a one percent annual raise over the next two years. Teachers are also demanding increases in support staff, including for the increasing number of immigrant students who are English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, and special education students.

This strike vote is the first in nearly 29 years; in 1989, St. Paul teachers voted overwhelmingly to walk out.

That strike was prevented by the last-minute intervention of then St. Paul Democratic Farmer Labor Mayor George Latimer, who canceled the strike shortly before it began.

In the ten days that have passed since the strike notice, SPPS and SPFT claim to have made progress on many of the initial issues but have failed to come to an agreement. The union has agreed to keep talks behind closed doors—keeping teachers in the dark—while the local media has become a platform for promoting the interests of school district officials, and the financial and corporate interests behind them, over the concerns of teachers.

The working conditions of teachers over the recent decades have been under constant attack. St. Paul budget shortfalls of \$23 million in 2017 and \$15 million in 2016 led to district-wide cuts, including slashing support staff, including school nurses, ESL and special education staff. In 2017 alone, \$7.5 million was siphoned from overall staffing, an additional \$6.5 million was cut by leaving vacancies open rather than hiring to fill positions, and another \$1.6 million in targeted cuts were made to other programs.

While the school district has cried broke, federal, state and city officials have showered billions of dollars in tax cuts on the state's Fortune 500 corporations, including retail giants Target and Best Buy, 3M Corporation, General Mills, US Bancorp and United Healthcare. Hundreds of millions in public funds were also just squandered on hosting the Super Bowl.

A teachers' strike would very quickly turn into a political confrontation with the Democratic Party establishment that runs St. Paul, including Melvin Carter, the city's first African American mayor. Educators in St. Paul, like their counterparts in West Virginia and other states, are fighting to recoup the

wages they have lost since the 2008 financial crash, and to overturn the corporate “school reform” policies championed by President Obama during his eight years in office, which are now being accelerated by the Trump administration.

Minnesota, which was reportedly home to the first charter school in 1991, has seen a sharp rise in the number of students enrolled in charter schools, from 41,604 in 2013 to 53,960 in 2017. The combined total of students enrolled in charters in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, however, is still fewer than the number of students enrolled in suburban and outstate charter schools.

While teachers enjoy popular support for a genuine struggle to defend their living standards and improve public education, the SPFT, which is tied to the Democratic Party political establishment, offers no way forward. The SPFT, along with the Democrats, sponsored the Caucus for Change movement, which elected several so-called progressive members to the school board, who turned around and implemented cost-cutting and other attacks on public education.

The SPFT has also promoted various stunts, including meetings with the boards of corporate giants, like US Bancorp, and social media campaigns to persuade these companies to contribute more for public education. Predictably, these impotent gestures have produced no better outcome than the union’s campaign for better board members.

The struggle facing St. Paul teachers, like all educators around the US and internationally, is a political one over the redistribution of society’s resources. Both the Democrats and Republicans defend the wealth and property of the capitalist owners, as do the unions. Teachers must reject this, and fight to mobilize the strength of the entire working class against capitalism and the grotesque levels of social inequality it produces.



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