

St. Paul, Minnesota teachers prepare to strike as Twin Cities janitors hold 24-hour walkout

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Saint Paul, Minnesota public school employees have voted overwhelmingly to strike on March 10 if agreement on a new contract covering 3,600 teachers and support staff is not reached. School employees voted by 82 percent to authorize the St. Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE), a local affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), to call a strike.

As teachers prepare to walk out, 4,000 janitors who clean commercial buildings, including skyscrapers in downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul, struck on Thursday afternoon to demand higher wages, paid sick days and safer working conditions, including non-toxic cleaning chemicals. Janitors at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International are set to strike Friday morning. Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 26 limited the strike to 24 hours, but felt it had no choice but to call the walkout with anger growing over four months of fruitless contract negotiations.

Last week, the SEIU called off a strike at St. Paul-based HealthPartners, which would have involved 1,800 nurses, dental and nursing assistants, nurse practitioners and midwives at more than 30 Minnesota locations. The union ignored a 95 percent strike mandate and cut a last-minute deal, which includes a 7.5 percent raise over the next three years, a freeze in real wages in the Twin Cities where the annual inflation rate is 2.5 percent.

The St. Paul Federation of Educators has kept educators on the job despite the lack of any movement in negotiations with St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS) officials, which began last May, and five mediation sessions submitted by the union since late October. The SPFE is negotiating two separate contracts: one for teachers and educational assistants and another for school and community service professionals.

“No one wants to strike, but St. Paul educators are

fed up,” Nick Faber, the president of the SPFE told the local CBS News affiliate. The last teachers strike in St. Paul was in 1946 when teachers walked out for higher wages, smaller class sizes and building improvements. It is considered by some historians to have been the first organized teachers strike in US history.

In February 2018, SPFE officials accepted an insulting 1 percent pay raise in each year of the two-year agreement, and delayed one raise, saving the district \$1 million. In addition, the union agreed to an increase in class sizes of one to two students in middle and high schools. They pitched the deal as a way to help the district balance its books and hire a few dozen special education and English language instructors.

This time, the union is calling for a miserly 3.4 percent raise over two years. School district officials are apparently resisting this, along with demands to hire more permanent nurses, social workers and special education aides.

The school district ties its budgeting to enrollment numbers based upon a per pupil formula of state aid. SPPS officials claim that “flexible class sizes” allow the enrollment cap to be increased and thus provide additional state funding. The district’s deficit was \$15 million in 2016; \$25 million in 2017; and \$27 million in the 2018-2019 school year.

While starving school districts of adequate funding, federal, state and local officials, led by the Democratic Party in Minnesota, branded as the Democratic Farmer Labor Party, have handed over billions in tax breaks to the state’s largest corporations like 3M, Target, Best Buy, US Bancorp, and United Healthcare. While demanding more concessions from educators, the school district is once again planning to seek an increase in regressive taxes to fund its budget shortfall.

After collaborating with the Democrats since the

early 1990s in the expansion of for-profit charter schools, in the new contract proposal the union is calling for a toothless “moratorium” on new charter schools until “the completion and review of a community impact study on charter schools in our community.” While posturing as an opponent of further charter school expansion, this demand, which will cost the district nothing, is designed to protect the institutional and financial interests of the union bureaucracy. But far from opposing more charters, which drain resources from the public schools, the AFT has aggressively sought to unionize charter school employees to make up for the loss of dues income from public school teachers who are being laid off.

The SPFE is promoting statements of support from Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren and Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar, while deliberately concealing the fact that the Democrats are no less enemies of public education than Trump and the Republicans. While the Democratic presidential candidates, including Bernie Sanders, hail the Obama administration, the truth is Obama vastly expanded charter schools and the use of standardized tests to scapegoat teachers for the educational problems caused by decades of budget cutting and the growth of poverty and social inequality.

The strike vote of St. Paul teachers is part of an international resurgence of class struggle and an international rebellion by educators against more than a decade of unrelenting austerity since the 2008 financial crash. This upsurge was initiated by the 2018 strikes by teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, which erupted in opposition to the AFT and the National Education Association (NEA). Internationally educators have walked out in Lebanon, Chile, Mexico, Iran, India, Holland, Britain and many other countries. Last week, 200,000 teachers in the Canadian province of Ontario struck.

In the US, 2020 has seen teacher protests in Florida, Virginia and other states. Contracts expire for teachers in Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and several other cities in June.

Teachers must not leave the conduct of the struggle to the SPFE, which is determined to prevent a strike of teachers as it would pit teachers directly against the Democratic Party. To wage a successful struggle teachers should take the fight into their own hands by

building independent rank-and-file committees. Teachers should break from the right wing perspective of the SPFE and fight for a unified struggle of workers in the Twin Cities area and internationally in defense of fully funded, high-quality public education.

The author also recommends:

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