

St. Paul, Minnesota teachers set to strike Tuesday

Anthony Bertolt
9 March 2020

After voting overwhelmingly to strike, 3,500 teachers in St. Paul, Minnesota are set to walk out Tuesday in the latest fight by educators in the United States and internationally against austerity and the destruction of public education. Teachers are fighting for improved wages and expanded services for their 37,000 students who have faced years of budget cuts implemented by Democratic Party-controlled local and state governments.

While teachers enjoy popular support, the Saint Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) is doing everything it can to prevent a walkout or to sabotage a strike if they cannot stop it. In the midst of the 2020 presidential elections, the SPFE and its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers, are particularly concerned that a strike would further expose the duplicity of the Democrats who posture as friends of teachers and public education even as they promote for-profit charter schools and other policies that accelerate the growth of social inequality.

Taking a page out of the playbook of the teacher unions which betrayed strikes in Chicago, Los Angeles and other cities, the SPFE dropped any demands for a significant pay raise for teachers and instead is focusing on proposals for increases staffing for mental health and other social services. While increased staffing in these areas is critical, the union is prepared to accept any gesture from the school board—including promises of future staffing, the setting up of joint labor-management bodies to investigate the fiscal plausibility of hiring more staff or push new, regressive taxes to hire a few mental health staff, and other maneuvers that will not cost the district and state government a penny. Once such a meaningless agreement is reached, the union, the district and the Democratic Party will announce that teachers have won a resounding

“victory.”

This only underscores the needs for teachers to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the SPFE and build rank-and-file strike committees to unite educators with students, parents and broader sections of the working class. These committees must reject what the political and corporate establishment says is affordable and fight for what teachers and students need. Such a struggle should be connected with reviving the powerful traditions of socialism in the Twin Cities and mobilizing the working class against both corporate-controlled parties.

The SPFE has proposed a miserly wage increase of only 3.4 percent in the first year and 2 percent in the second year, after years in which educators have essentially suffered a pay freeze. In the SPFE contract, the union agreed to 1 percent pay raises over the two-year contract, and even to higher class sizes. The union said this was necessary to fund a small increase in staff for English language learners and special education. By limiting pay raises, the union ensured that the last contract did not exceed the budget the district had set for itself prior to negotiations.

The issue is not increased wages vs. expanding critical support staff, but a fight for both. The top 10 largest corporations in Minnesota alone made \$40.64 billion in profits in 2019, with many of them paying less in taxes than the previous year.

A list of Minnesota billionaires include: Whitney MacMillan, \$6 billion (Cargill); Glen Taylor, \$2.6 billion Taylor Corp., Minnesota Timberwolves, Minnesota Lynx, United FC; Stanley Hubbard, \$2.2 billion (Hubbard Broadcasting); William F. Austin, \$1.6 billion (Starkey Hearing Technologies) and Martha MacMillan, \$1.3 billion, and John MacMillan, \$1.3 billion, two other heirs to the Cargill, the world's

biggest agriculture business and the largest private company in the US.

A wealth tax on the private fortunes of these oligarchs would provide more than enough resources to fully fund a living wage and a vast expansion of service not only in St. Paul but throughout the state.

The union, however, is a direct agent of the Democratic Party, which no less than the Republicans opposes any significant redistribution of wealth. In fact, the same school board that is opposing teachers' demands was put into place by the SPFE itself.

St. Paul mayor Melvin Carter—who was endorsed by the SPFE and has joined the negotiations to subordinate declared that we are “not facing a situation of opposing or conflicting visions for our community, but really the constraints of limited resources.”

The fact is teachers have one vision—living wages, expanding services and fully funded schools—while the Democrats, the school board and the union have another—continued austerity and the continued funneling of society's wealth into the hands of the corporate and financial aristocracy.

Significantly, the SPFE has shown its own nervousness about the political radicalization of teachers and the growing interest in socialism among workers and youth. While the union has not officially endorsed any Democratic presidential candidate, it has lent its support to the efforts by the Democratic Party, including US Senator from Minnesota Amy Klobuchar to oppose the efforts by Bernie Sanders to win the nomination. The torpedoing of Sanders' campaign only underscores the dead end of Sanders' claim that the Democratic Party—a party of Wall Street—can be turned into an instrument to fight social inequality.

The opposition of St. Paul teachers is part of a growing wave of struggle across the US and internationally. As teachers prepare to strike, public school teachers in Puebla, Mexico are blockading railway lines to demand increased hiring. Over the last two years, over 700,000 teachers in the US have struck. But every struggle from West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona to Los Angeles, Oakland and Chicago, has been sabotaged by the unions, subordinated to the Democratic Party and defeated.

Conditions are emerging to unite teachers with every broader sections of the workers, including janitors and health care workers who are also biting at the bit to

fight against poverty level wages and overwork. As of this month, one-third of teachers in Minnesota have not settled contracts.

To unite workers in a common struggle, St. Paul teachers should organize rank-and-file committees, which act independently of the AFT-SPFE, and fight to expand the strike to teachers statewide.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact