

“We could win these demands if we united with other teachers”

St. Paul, Minnesota teachers strike

Anthony Bertolt
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After voting overwhelmingly to strike, 3,500 teachers in St. Paul, Minnesota walked out on 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 37,000 St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS) students who have suffered years of budget cuts imposed by the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, the Minnesota affiliate of the national Democratic Party.

On the picket lines Tuesday morning, Micah, a school counselor, told the WWS, “I have to look after 400 students. At some of the schools, the ratio of students to support staff is 1,500 to one, or one counselor for the whole school. Similarly, there are no nurses at some schools. I put students first, and it’s harder for me to help students under these conditions.

“Two years ago, a big part of the contract included a dispute over contributions to SPPS from Ecolab (a St. Paul-based chemical and water company). The amount of money it would take to hire this support staff is not even a fraction of that money. It’s harder to teach when students come to my classes with problems from outside school.

“Teachers should be paid more, especially after not having increases for the previous years. I think we could win these demands if we united with other teachers.”

Another teacher criticized efforts to scapegoat teachers for educational problems associated with poverty and underfunded schools, saying, “For some students, the only warmth and food they get in the day is at school. How do they expect us teachers to solve these problems?”

The strike, the first in St. Paul since 1946, enjoys widespread support from students, parents and other workers. The St. Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE), however, is proposing 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 suffered a freeze in real wages. In the last SPFE contract, the union agreed to 1 percent pay raises over the two-year contract, and

increased class sizes. The union said this was necessary to fund a small increase in staff for English language learners and special education.

Allied with the Democratic Party, the SPFE is once again limiting pay demands to ensure they will not exceed the budget the district set prior to negotiations. At the same time, union officials have made proposals for staffing increases, particularly in mental health services. But the union has signaled its willingness to accept an agreement that meets the district’s fiscal targets as long as it is combined with some face-saving gesture, including promises of joint efforts to increase staffing or find “new revenue sources,” a euphemism for increasing regressive taxes.

St. Paul teachers should take a special warning from the joint statement issued by American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten and SPFE President Nick Faber this morning, which said, “Strikes like the ones in Chicago, Los Angeles and other places across the nation have shown us what we can accomplish for our students and communities when we work together. Now it’s SPFE’s turn.”

In fact, the deals signed by the unions in Los Angeles, Chicago and other cities completely betrayed the aspirations of teachers and did nothing to reverse decades of declining school funding and teacher pay and eroding classroom conditions. On the contrary, the strikes were shut down on the basis of meaningless promises to address class sizes, funding and the expansion of charter schools sometime in the future.

The Chicago Teachers Union shut down the 11-day strike last October before giving teachers the right to vote and agreed to a deal, which includes wholly inadequate increases in the number of social workers and nurses over a five-year period, little or no increases in prep time, and worthless “aspirations” to reduce class sizes through a joint labor-management review committee. The deal also paves the way for more school closings in the city.

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.

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

But the fact is there are two directly conflicting interests at hand. The teachers have one “vision”—living wages, expanding services and fully funded schools. The Democrats, the school board and the unions insist that there are not enough resources to meet the teachers' legitimate demands.

In their joint statement this morning, Weingarten and Faber write that the strike is about “a commitment for the union and the school district to work together to address the root causes of St. Paul's education funding issues.”

But the root causes of declining school funding in St. Paul, like everywhere else, is capitalism, a system that subordinates every aspect of social life, including the education of the next generation, to the relentless drive for profit by giant corporations and banks. Attaining the resources needed to fully fund education requires a radical redistribution of wealth, something the Democrats and Republicans—and millionaire union officials like Weingarten (annual salary of more than \$500,000)—completely oppose.

The problem is not “limited resources” but the monopolization of society's resources by the super-rich. 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 includes: Whitney MacMillan (Cargill), \$6 billion; Glen Taylor (Taylor Corp., Minnesota Timberwolves, Minnesota Lynx, United FC), \$2.6 billion; Stanley Hubbard (Hubbard Broadcasting), \$2.2 billion; William F. Austin (Starkey Hearing Technologies), \$1.6 billion; Martha MacMillan and John MacMillan—two other heirs to Cargill, the world's biggest agriculture business and the largest private company in the US—with \$1.3 billion each.

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 services not only in St. Paul but throughout the state.

The issue is not increased wages vs. expanding critical support staff, but a fight for both.

The issues in St. Paul are the same teachers confront throughout the US and internationally. Over the last two years, over 700,000 teachers and other educators in the US have conducted the largest wave of teacher strikes in decades, from West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona to Los Angeles, Oakland and Chicago. This is part of an international upsurge of educators. Last month, 200,000 teachers in Ontario, Canada struck and even as St. Paul teachers walk the picket lines, hundreds of teachers in Puebla, Mexico are protesting to demand increased funding.

The AFT and the National Education Association have done everything to block the separate strikes from coalescing into a national strike, while promoting the lie that teachers can attain their demands through the Democratic Party. But Democrats like Obama and Biden, no less than Trump and the Republicans, have spent decades cutting school funding and pushing for-profit charter schools while squandering trillions on bank bailouts, wars and corporate subsidies.

Conditions are emerging to unite teachers with ever 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 struggle to teachers and broader sections of the working class throughout the state and beyond.



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