

St. Paul teachers union uses coronavirus outbreak to justify sell-out of three-day strike

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The 3,500 striking teachers and school support staff of St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS) in Minnesota were sent back to the classroom Friday after the St. Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) announced in the early morning hours that they had reached a tentative agreement with the school district. Though students were sent back to school Friday, the union and school district maintained all weekend that classes would resume for the 37,000 SPPS students on Monday despite the threat that the coronavirus outbreak poses to school employees, students and the broader community. Plans only changed when governor Tim Walz signed an executive order Sunday morning cancelling classes statewide.

Following a 19-hour mediation session monitored by Governor Walz, SPFE leaders cynically invoked the threat posed by the pandemic to shut down the three-day strike and send teachers back to work before they learned any details of the detail, let alone voted on it. Displaying complete contempt for educators, SPFE President Nick Faber said, “Only an unprecedented pandemic and concern over the health and safety of our students and staff stopped St. Paul educators from fighting harder and longer for more resources for our children.”

This is absurd. If Faber and the union were truly concerned about the health and safety of students and staff, they would not have sanctioned sending them back to potentially infected schools on Monday. Current understanding of the COVID-19 outbreak emphasizes the importance of reducing the potential for transmission of the disease through the use of “social distancing,” which is obviously violated when workers are brought together in factories, schools and other workplaces.

Aside from doing nothing to decrease the

transmission of COVID-19, the union betrayed the demands of teachers for improved wages and staffing. According to a *Star Tribune* report, teachers will receive only a 1.5 percent pay increase this year and just 2 percent next year. Because educators have gone the previous two years with increases of only 1 percent per year, this means the union has effectively agreed to four years of wage freezes after accounting for inflation.

The SPFE and its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers, were determined to end the strike especially under conditions in which hundreds of thousands of rank-and-file teachers have been engaged in two years of strikes and mass protests, which have exposed the fact that the union-backed Democrats are just as much the enemies of teachers and public education as Trump and the Republicans.

While details about the tentative agreement have not been released, the union claims it was able to win increases to “social workers, nurses, intervention specialists, psychologists and multilingual staff.” Recent teacher contracts nationally have involved similar vague promises about staffing, including in Los Angeles and Chicago, that included loopholes that allow the school districts to continue chronic understaffing.

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and its pseudo-left-led Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), which has close relations to unions in St. Paul, Los Angeles and other cities, has pioneered the demand for vague and “costless” commitments from the school district. SPFE’s agreement features a number of these, including “cooperation on pursuing a moratorium on new charter schools,” as well as “an expansion of restorative practices to ‘build positive school climates and held end the school-to-prison pipeline.’”

The latter measure in fact builds on previous union efforts to heighten divisions in the working class on the basis of race. Both SPPS and the union have long agreed to a contractual relationship with the Pacific Educational Group (PEG), a consulting firm that claims that education in America is built around “white culture, tradition and social norms” and “white privilege.” From 2010-2015, SPPS spent over \$3 million on this organization.

The claim that the decades-long starvation of the public schools is the product of “racism,” not capitalism, is the stock-in-trade of the Democratic Party, which wants to conceal its role in slashing school funding while pouring vast sums of money into endless wars, Wall Street bank bailouts and corporate tax cuts. African American politicians like President Obama and St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter defend corporate interests just like their white counterparts in both big business parties.

Far from broadening union demands beyond educators for the sake of the community, the union is doing what it has done for years, namely to keep education spending completely within the parameters laid out by the school district. Nothing has been “introduced into the dialogue” that will result in any gains for education or educators. Rather, SPFE leaders have cynically jumped on the coronavirus excuse in a last-ditch attempt to keep educators from demanding more.

From the very beginning, St. Paul district officials made it clear they would not budge on what money was available, blaming the restrictions on declining enrollment and underfunding by the state and federal governments. SPFE President Faber accepted the lie that there is no money, saying, “Our schools are severely underfunded, and we know that. But at the end of the day, what we were saying at the table is, given that context, the district still has a budget and still has a certain pot of money.”

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. Minnesota billionaires include the heirs of the Cargill fortune, the world’s biggest agriculture business and the largest privately held company in the US.

No doubt wider political considerations were also involved in the union’s quick capitulation. After having spent days in St. Paul, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Randi Weingarten, rushed back to New York City to keep the situation there from exploding as opposition emerged among teachers and parents to Mayor Bill de Blasio’s plan, only abandoned Sunday evening, to keep schools open.

Over the past two years, more than 700,000 teachers and other educators have conducted massive strikes, from West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Los Angeles, and Chicago, and just as St. Paul teachers were picketing, internationally in Canada and in Mexico. Nowhere have the unions called for a joint struggle with these teachers. Instead, they have worked closely with the Democratic Party to impose a strategy of isolating each strike and sending it to defeat.

Contrary to union claims that the epidemic necessitated an end to the strike, the coronavirus outbreak poses the objective need to extend the strike and institute measures to curtail its spread. Such measures include the continued closure of school campuses and payment of full wages to all workers, the provision of free breakfasts and lunches to students at home and massive increases in educational and technical support services to ensure that students and educators are able to effectively move to temporary online instruction.

Workers should reject the tentative agreement, and above all, begin forming a rank-and-file committee to take the struggle out of the hands of the SPFE and begin coordinating their efforts with workers across the world. The defense of educators, public education and students requires a break with the unions and the Democratic Party, including its Minnesota affiliate, the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, and the building of the Socialist Equality Party.



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