

Minneapolis Public Schools and teachers union pursue agreement to prioritize race in hiring and firing

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Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) and the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) are negotiating a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) entitled “Recruit and Retain Educators Who Reflect Our Students,” which would promote hiring and firing teachers in the district based on race. Online negotiations will continue on August 12, and, if agreed upon, this new policy would go into effect for the 2022-23 and 2023-24 hiring cycles.

The measure’s aim, in line with the Democratic Party’s program of identity politics, is to undermine legislation passed during the Civil Rights movement which outlawed racial discrimination, render seniority rights moot and stoke divisions among educators, parents and students. While the exact wording of the MOA is being debated, both the union and the district aim to exempt “teachers of color” from layoffs or excesses (a forced location change, prior to layoff) and prioritize these identities for recall when positions open.

This divisive and reactionary proposal takes place under conditions of the explosion of COVID-19 nationally and the Democratic Party’s demand for a full reopening of schools. It is a life-and-death necessity for educators, parents and students alike that schools and all nonessential businesses be closed and the pandemic be eradicated. Instead of uniting and mobilizing educators across all ethnicities to demand that schools remain closed to in-person instruction and ensuring high-quality online education for all, the MFT is united with the district in the promotion of racialism.

Further, the mass budget cuts to public services anticipated during the pandemic have only been temporarily forestalled with very limited funds provided by the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Layoffs and cuts are on the agenda, and the MPS is positioning itself to stage a bitter race-based battle to undermine a unified struggle by all educators.

During negotiations, both the district and the union claimed to be fighting “white supremacy,” covering up the bipartisan, decades-long defunding of public education and the political establishment’s refusal to adequately fund building repairs, provide good salaries and benefits to educators and staff, and secure wrap-around services, counseling and social supports for students.

The measure, as proposed by the union, directly repudiates Article VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Act was a linchpin

of the end of Jim Crow and *de jure* segregation for which many workers, black and white, fought and gave their lives. It states that it is illegal to discriminate against a person on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) enforces civil rights laws prohibiting workplace reductions-in-force based on discriminatory reasons.

To sidestep the law, the district and union are consciously excising certain words they know could trigger legal injunctions, while making the desired outcome obvious. For example, the union’s original proposal was titled “Educators of Color Retention” but has now been changed to “Recruit and Retain Educators That Reflect Our Students.” When a union bargaining member asked why the title had been changed, claiming the new title was “whitewashed,” a district official admitted, “That was done for legal reasons. The EEOC doesn’t allow it [the MOA as it was originally written] to be based on race. So that’s really the reason; to still be inclusive but to do it with language in which we can legally defend.”

The MOA uses “inclusive language” and “non-discriminatory categories” in its criteria for layoff exemptions, encompassing a large group of educators of all races, in order to avoid risk of legal ramification. Further, the district was careful to use the language “may exempt” rather than “shall exempt” in their counter-proposal to exclusively prioritize protecting teachers of color, within a broad-based group of “exempt teachers,” when reductions-in-force arise.

The language states that teachers in the following sites or programs may be exempt: “the 15 Racially Isolated Schools (RIS) in the district with the greatest concentrations of poverty, Montessori schools, immersion programs, Native and Heritage language literacy programs, and the ‘Grow Your Own Program’.” The most recent draft also grants special status to “alumni of Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities, and/or Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) programs” and explicitly states that the criteria be used to “support retaining a more diverse educator workforce,” namely, “teachers of color.”

Further, the district would share a list with the union on a quarterly basis containing the public data of all teachers who meet one or more of the “teachers of color” criteria listed in the

agreement. In this way, the union and district will partner in the destruction of teachers' jobs and the parceling out of positions.

Seniority rights, also known as tenure, were the result of hard fought struggles by workers, initially granted to teachers in New Jersey in 1909 as a protection from nepotism, favoritism and any politically motivated hiring and firing of teachers.

Knowing that this broadside against tenure will enrage educators, the MFT and district are whipping up a cloud of racial distraction, trading epithets of "white supremacy" back and forth across the table.

In its latest counter-proposal, the union called for an initial limit on the scope of exemption to the "teachers of color" who work at the 15 "racially-isolated schools" in the district. MFT bargaining team member Brionna Harder suggested "zeroing in" on "historically unstable school staffs ... rather than create so many exceptions that in effect renders seniority irrelevant to begin with."

The district rejected the union's suggestion, calling it a "highly problematic" proposal, stating that it "perhaps unintentionally reifies white supremacy" and demanding that the entire list of criteria be made available. By the end of the June 24 negotiations, both parties agreed to think of "creative ways" to further expand their racial criteria.

Eric Moore, senior officer for MPS accountability, research and equity, summed up the general outlook by both parties at the June 24 negotiations session, demonizing "white" teachers as the opposition. "I don't want us to play within the rules of white supremacy, I'd like us in our positions to own our power and do the right thing and have the courage to say this is really hard work but our value is to protect our teachers of color on behalf of the experiences of all the students of Minneapolis. ... It is going to upset predominantly white teachers, veteran white teachers, so *that's* the work." (Emphasis in original)

This racial narrative represents a terrible danger to teachers, students and the entire working class. It must be opposed through the fight for independent rank-and-file committees defending social equality, the full funding of public education and the eradication of the pandemic. The broad-based efforts by the federal and state governments, school districts and unions for "racial equity" and racial quotas are a transparent "divide and conquer" policy engineered by Wall Street. One cannot defend the rights of black teachers without defending those of white teachers.

It is fear of the power of the working class and the pivotal role ascribed to teachers in the return-to-work campaign that make such race-based policies so prevalent. While schools have been starved of resources, there is a proliferation of race-based programs. The Biden administration has proposed over \$2 billion in its 2022 fiscal year budget request to recruit and retain educators of color, which includes over \$90 million in Grow Your Own (GYO) educator programs. GYO programs are one of many race-oriented programs designed to pit teachers against each other for jobs. There exist GYO programs in nearly every state, with at least 30 states implementing a statewide GYO policy.

The Minnesota state legislature recently passed the Increase Teachers of Color Act (ITCA), alongside the state education bill granting \$10 million for its Grow Your Own program and another \$4.5 million for mentoring and retention incentive grants based on

race. New policies were also implemented which would give certain school districts cash bonuses of up to \$5,000 every time a "teacher of color" was hired.

The Alabama Department of Education has promoted \$5,000 grants for math and science teachers in the state to give up their tenure rights for newly hired teachers of color. In Washington, the Seattle Educators Association reached a deal with the Seattle Public Schools in 2019 to allocate \$260,000 to "racial equity teams," which would be responsible for hiring and firing teachers based on their race and whether they contribute to established racial quotas of educators for each race.

The Democratic Party and the pseudo-left, fearing an upsurge of working class unity from below, have continuously sought to stoke racial divisions and explain eruptions of mass social anger in purely racial terms.

The response of the Democratic Party to the brutal murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minnesota police Officer Derek Chauvin, which sparked mass multiracial protests of workers and youth against police brutality and social inequality across the globe, has been to intensify its promotion of racist politics, which has only served to embolden the far right. The aim of Minnesota's Democratic Governor Tim Walz and the entire state legislature is to obscure the fundamental class contradictions that lie behind the immense social crisis which they oversee.

Every effort must be made to oppose the race-based agreement between the MPS and MFT. There is nothing remotely progressive about a policy which grants hiring and firing protections to teachers based solely on the color of their skin. Only a socialist program united under the banner of liberation for the international working class can succeed against these reactionary policies meant to isolate and confuse students, teachers and workers from realizing their place as a revolutionary class.

Teachers, parents, students and workers must unite to demand full funding for public education and an end to social inequality, as part of a broad-based struggle to close schools and nonessential workplaces and fully fund remote learning until the pandemic is contained.



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