

8,000 Minneapolis, St. Paul educators set to strike Tuesday: What's at stake

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Do you work at Minneapolis or St. Paul Public Schools? Contact us to describe the conditions educators face and what you think about this struggle. Comments will be published anonymously.

Over 8,000 St. Paul and Minneapolis public teachers and educational support staff are preparing to go on strike Tuesday to secure major wage increases, adequate staff levels, manageable classroom sizes, more resources for public education and protection from the ravages of COVID-19. Educators in both school districts voted overwhelmingly in February to authorize strikes, with teachers and support staff in Minneapolis approving a walkout by a near-unanimous 97 and 98 percent, respectively.

Teachers and school employees have been asked to make significant sacrifices throughout the pandemic, and now they are being told once again that there is not enough money to meet their most basic needs, let alone the needs of their students. Support staff at Minneapolis public schools have a starting salary of just \$24,000. As one educator told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I work in Minneapolis, but I can't afford to live in Minneapolis."

Two-thirds of the students in St. Paul and 40 percent in Minneapolis live in poverty, with hundreds listed by the districts as homeless. Far from providing the necessary funds to address these social ills, the Democratic Party has funneled public money into for-profit charter schools, draining critical resources from the public schools. More than one-third of all St. Paul students are no longer enrolled in the cash-starved district. Pointing to the decline in enrollment—which has been the result of the deliberate policy of the Democratic Party to defund public education—district officials plan to close five St. Paul public schools and consolidate another 10 by the fall.

The Twin Cities' political, business and media establishment are already mobilizing against teachers. On Friday, the editorial board of the *Star Tribune*, the largest newspaper in Minnesota, published an article titled "It's the worst time for teachers to strike." The board wrote, "Some may believe this is a good time because of the millions of additional funds school districts have received under the federal American Rescue Plan (ARP). But union negotiators must keep in mind that those are one-time funds, making it difficult for districts to use them for ongoing spending on staffing and salaries."

Both districts are projecting significant budget shortfalls, the editorial continued, including \$25.5 million for Minneapolis Public Schools and \$42.8 million for St. Paul Public Schools. The editorial writers then bitterly complained that "student enrollment has decreased by 11% since 2015, while the number of student support positions increased by 54% during the same period."

In other words, despite two years which have seen the wealth of US billionaires increase by more than \$2.1 trillion and corporate profits skyrocket—including at Target, UnitedHealth Group, Cargill, 3M and other Minnesota-based Fortune 500 companies—there will be nothing but austerity for public schools and the working class.

The newspaper feigned concern that a strike would disrupt education for students who had "just settled into more normal in-classroom learning and activities" and plunge students into "a situation that's even worse than the COVID distance-learning days."

This is sheer hypocrisy! The real attitude of the corporate and political establishment towards working-class students has been demonstrated by decades of bipartisan defunding of public education and the reckless reopening of schools in the middle of the pandemic.

Thousands of students and educators in the Twin Cities were infected by the latest surge of the Omicron variant, which killed a child between the ages of 10-14 in the Twin Cities along with a school staff member in late January. Angered over the indifference to their lives, students from all eight high schools in St. Paul and many middle schools walked out and thousands signed petitions denouncing "SPPS" [St. Paul Public Schools] failure to follow health guidelines and keep SPPS students & their families safe." Over the weekend, SPPS officials announced the dropping of contact tracing and this week they are moving to end mask mandates.

Educators in the Twin Cities are determined to fight for a better life for themselves, their families and their students. However, they are engaged in a conflict not just with the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) and SPPS systems, but in a political struggle against the Democratic Party, which has long dominated politics in the Twin Cities and throughout Minnesota.

In this fight, educators can place no faith in the two unions—the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) and St. Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFE)—to wage a serious struggle. The MFT and SPFE have dragged out negotiations with the school districts for over a year, and if they have set a strike date recently, it is only because they are preparing to force through yet another deal which fails to meet educators' needs. The two unions are working around the clock to cut a deal and prevent a strike.

Both the MFT and SPFE, like their national parents the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association, have collaborated closely with the Democrats in executing a relentless assault on public education over the last 40 years, allowing class sizes to balloon, staff to become increasingly overworked, and pay, particularly for support staff, to fall to atrocious lows. Even more criminally, the unions have worked to keep schools open during a pandemic which has claimed close to a million lives in the US, resulting in the needless spread of the virus and the premature deaths of 12,373 people in Minnesota, including 2,513 in Hennepin County alone.

A line must be drawn! For the current struggle to succeed, teachers and school staff must take the initiative themselves.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges educators to form rank-and-file strike committees at every school, which will formulate demands based on what educators and their students need, not what the school districts and city and state governments claim is affordable. A critical function of these committees will be to appeal to and mobilize the working class throughout the region and indeed the country.

To carry out a successful fight, it is necessary to have a sober assessment of the conditions educators confront.

1. Falling living standards and intolerable conditions in schools.

Teachers and school staff have been subjected to decades of declining real pay. While the MFT has stated it is demanding an increase of support staff starting pay from \$24,000 to \$35,000 and a 20 percent general wage increase for teachers, this would still not make up for years of stagnating income. Moreover, these demands are all but certain to be abandoned by MFT during its negotiations with the district. SPFE, for its part, is only asking for a 2.5 percent wage increase, far below 7.5 percent inflation, and does not even list wages in its bargaining “priorities.”

In the lead-up to the strike of St. Paul teachers in 2020—which the SPFE abruptly shut down and betrayed, cynically pointing to the outbreak of the pandemic—the state of Minnesota was projected to have an over \$1.5 billion budget surplus. Despite this, the local St. Paul Democratic Party administration, led by SPFE-endorsed Mayor Melvin Carter, persisted in the claims that there was not enough money, saying there were “constraints of limited resources.” However, resources for education have been starved for years through the handover of massive tax breaks to the corporations, such as Target and UnitedHealth.

Both the MFT and SPFE are seeking to divide teachers, first through proposing separate slates of demands, and second, and more sinisterly, through the promotion of divisive racial politics. Instead of seeking to unite and raise the living standards of *all* educators, of all races and ethnicities, both the MFT and SPFE have promoted reactionary plans to hire and fire educators based on race. The utilization of racial and identity politics, long a method of the Democratic Party, is aimed not at improving the conditions of minority workers, but rather at splitting the working class, while at the same time advancing the interests of a thin layer of the privileged upper middle class.

2. A pandemic which remains out of control. Society has entered the third year of the pandemic that has claimed nearly a million lives, officially, in the US alone. Mitigation measures have been completely abandoned as part of a top-down bipartisan effort to lift all restrictions on the spread COVID-19. In St. Paul, SPFE has not even mentioned the fact the school district has recently abandoned contact tracing.

The Democratic Party, the unions and school districts have worked together to force teachers back into classrooms, causing the deaths and hospitalizations of their colleagues and the students. Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT with a salary that exceeds \$540,000, admitted to the *New York Times* that she spent 15 hours each day on the phone with White House officials, the CDC and local unions to coordinate the reopening of schools, despite scientists’ warnings of the dangers to students and teachers.

The “herd immunity” and “live with the virus” policies have been pursued by both the Democrats and Republicans, with the support of the unions. Schools have been forced to reopen to keep workers on the job and producing profits for the corporations, Wall Street and the super-rich, resulting in a catastrophe for the majority of the population.

3. The danger of world war. Ominously, there is the immense danger of a world war instigated by the US and NATO against Russia menacing this struggle. The invasion of Ukraine and the promotion of Russian nationalism by Putin is reactionary and must be opposed by class-conscious workers. But left out of all the hysterical war propaganda in the media is the historical context out of which this crisis emerges, including the decades-long drive of the US and NATO to militarily encircle and ultimately subjugate Russia.

Faced with an explosive domestic social and political crisis, the Democratic Party, along with significant sections of the Republicans and the corporate media, are once again attempting to channel social discontent outward against an “external” enemy, but workers and young people have no interest in a catastrophic new world war being launched,

one which potentially may be fought with nuclear weapons. While teachers are told there are no resources, Biden has proposed \$770 billion for the war machine, including many billions for nuclear weapon modernization—a figure which is almost certain to increase as the legislation makes its way through Congress.

4. The growth of the class struggle. The eruption of “war fever” in the media and the political establishment is a direct response to an increasingly disastrous domestic crisis, and, in particular, the growth of strikes and other struggles of workers in recent years.

Educators have been in the forefront of these, with a wave of wildcat strikes by teachers in West Virginia, Arizona and other states in 2018, to a series of walkouts by teachers in Los Angeles, Oakland and Chicago in 2019.

Since the pandemic began, educators have been engaged in an almost continuous battle against the dangers of COVID-19, including the courageous vote by Chicago teachers earlier this year to force a return to remote learning.

In each case, however, the unions—with the support of pseudo-left organizations, such as the National Educators United and the Democratic Socialists of America—worked to contain and shut down the struggles, above all seeking to keep them from developing into a direct confrontation with the Democratic Party and the capitalist system.

But anger is growing throughout the working class over rapidly surging inflation, unbearably long hours and the ongoing impact of the pandemic. This opposition found initial expression in strikes by industrial workers at Volvo Trucks and John Deere last year and is fueling discontent among tens of thousands of rail workers at BNSF and oil workers more recently, where the unions have sought to block strikes and keep workers on the job.

On Friday, hundreds of teachers in the west Chicago suburbs went on strike to demand higher wages, and bus drivers and other school staff have organized sickouts in recent weeks over low pay and mask mandates ending in Sacramento, California, Nevada and Louisiana.

The way forward

Educators must be on guard against any attempt by the unions to announce a last-minute agreement, or to settle one district and isolate teachers at the other. There can be no doubt that the MFT and SPFE are seeking to reach another concessions deal behind workers’ backs and push it through at the earliest opportunity.

The districts have already made it apparent they are opposed to meeting teachers’ demands. Nothing serious is going to be won unless a real, organized fight is carried out.

The urgent task is for educators to take the initiative, through the formation of rank-and-file strike committees at every school. Such committees must include the hundreds of food service workers at Minneapolis Public Schools who have also voted to authorize a strike, but whom the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) is isolating from educators.

An immediate task of these committees will be to democratically formulate demands based on the needs of all educators, such as bringing all support staff up to a genuinely livable wage, a substantial raise for all educators and annual cost-of-living increases to make up for surging inflation, and the infusion of billions of dollars—paid for with major increases in corporate taxes—to hire more staff and lower classroom sizes. In addition, serious measures must be taken to protect teachers, students and their families against COVID-19, including the switch to remote learning until the virus is fully contained.

Such committees should appeal to and seek to mobilize workers not just in Minneapolis and St. Paul, but across the US and internationally. Educators and workers everywhere are facing the same problems and are looking to take a stand against spiraling inequality, the destruction of public education and the never-ending pandemic.

In their fight, Minneapolis and St. Paul teachers confront an entire system—capitalism—which subordinates every major social question to the relentless pursuit of personal wealth and profit. This has resulted in the enrichment to the tune of trillions of dollars of the billionaires during the pandemic, but the horrific loss of life and worsening conditions for the working class.

The working class requires a new political perspective: socialism, which means the reorganization of society to meet the needs of the great majority of the population, and a war on the pandemic, not a new world war.



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