

Minneapolis educators launch first strike since 1970, as St. Paul teachers union blocks joint walkout

Marcus Day
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Do you work at Minneapolis or St. Paul Public Schools? Tell us what you think about SPFE's last-minute deal. Comments will be published anonymously.

More than 4,000 teachers and educational support staff in Minneapolis, Minnesota, launched the first strike in the city's school district in more than 50 years at midnight on Tuesday.

In neighboring St. Paul, however, the St. Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) announced it had reached a tentative agreement with its school district Monday night, calling off a joint walkout, by roughly the same number of teachers and staff, that had been scheduled to coincide with that of Minneapolis teachers. It must be stated bluntly: The decision by SPFE to block a walkout in St. Paul is a betrayal of educators' desire for a combined struggle.

The strike by Minneapolis teachers and support staff, as well as the overwhelming strike vote by St. Paul educators, are part of a growing militancy and opposition in the working class, from teachers in the Chicago suburbs who also struck Friday, to school bus drivers who have launched sickouts in California, Louisiana and Nevada in recent weeks, to aerospace workers on strike or locked out in Iowa and Ohio, respectively.

Educators in both Minnesota districts are fighting to overturn decades of eroding pay and ballooning classroom sizes, and to secure adequate staffing levels and protection from COVID-19. This places them in a direct confrontation with the Democratic Party, which has for years starved schools in the Twin Cities of resources.

A special education teacher at a middle school in Minneapolis described the abominable conditions pervasive in MPS, telling the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We need at least 15 more adults in this building, to possibly, POSSIBLY, get it back under staff control."

Student fights, violence against teachers, and other anti-social behavior by students acting out is common, she said, making the school "a very dangerous place."

"Currently, no learning is occurring in the school, and we are losing staff morale and members by the day. The strike not only fights for what we need, but gives us refuge from the inhumane conditions of Minneapolis Schools. I feel like I'm working in a jail, not an institute of education."

Young people in the Twin Cities have faced an increasingly desperate situation, with a staggering two thirds of students in both Minneapolis and St. Paul school districts living below the federal poverty line, and 300 students in St. Paul reported to be homeless. Meanwhile, enrollment has been falling for years, as the districts have had their resources siphoned off by successive city administrations, funneled instead to for-profit charter schools. Consequently, more than one third of students living in St. Paul are no longer enrolled in the district.

These conditions have combined with the catastrophic impact of COVID-19, which has sickened and killed both teachers and students, to drive ever greater numbers of educators to leave the profession. Nearly a quarter of educational support positions in Minneapolis schools are vacant, according to the *Sahan Journal*, triple the figure compared to 2018.

Minneapolis Public Schools issued a statement in response to the strike, declaring, "While it is disappointing to hear this news, we know our organizations' mutual priorities are based on our deep commitment to the education of Minneapolis students. MPS will remain at the mediation table non-stop in an effort to reduce the length and impact of this strike."

The decision by SPFE to call off the strike by several thousand teachers Monday was undoubtedly reached in

close consultation with the Minnesota Federation of Teachers (MFT) and their parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). AFT President Randi Weingarten (whose annual salary is in excess of \$500,000) has worked relentlessly to force the reopening of schools despite the deadly threat from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In an indication of Weingarten's efforts to divide teachers between the two districts and her intimate involvement in the negotiations, she told the *New York Times*, "The difference between the bargaining this weekend in St. Paul and Minneapolis were night and day."

In a press conference Monday night, SPFE released no concrete details of its agreement, claiming only that it was "an historic settlement" that supposedly reduces class sizes, includes mental health support and increases wages for hyper-exploited educational assistants.

However, school district administrators are already signaling that the deal will fall far short of teachers' demands and be yet another austerity agreement. Joe Gothard, St. Paul Public Schools superintendent, said that they had "arrived at fair and equitable agreements that respect our collective desire to do right by our students, while *working within the district's budget and enrollment limitations.*" [emphasis added]

Any deal reached with the district absent a real fight—given administrators' repeated and fraudulent declarations that there is no money—will inevitably fail to meet teachers' demands for a reversal of years of wage stagnation and a massive infusion of resources into public schools.

SPFE had already made clear that it accepted the basic framework of the districts' austerity prescriptions, stating that it was only demanding a 2.5 percent general wage increase per year for teachers, which would result in a 5 percent or more cut in real wages with surging inflation taken into account.

As has become increasingly common in schools across the US, the districts have sought to sow divisions between educational workers, in effect creating a tier system between teachers and low-paid support staff—a situation that has had the tacit support of the unions.

Educators, however, are more and more seeking to raise the living standards of all workers. "I think pitting teachers/EA [education assistants]/TA [teaching assistants]/specialists against each other is the wrong move and suggesting it's teacher's fault that others don't have a pay increase is false," an educator in St. Paul

commented on Facebook, replying to suggestions that teachers need to sacrifice pay so that support staff can earn more.

"Money is spent on lots of things and we ALL deserve competitive wages that keep up with inflation and retain quality staff, and raising the wages and benefits for our critical support staff is integral to the school."

The move by SPFE to call off the strike confirms the warnings of the WSWS, which stated in an article Sunday, "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."

Pursuing an increasingly frenetic and reckless war drive, the Biden administration and the ruling class more broadly are attempting to impose a false "national unity," seeking to channel social discontent over a rapidly expanding domestic crisis outward. The White House is heavily relying on the unions in this effort, including in particular the AFT, whose president, Weingarten, sits on the Democratic National Committee.

The WSWS urges educators to rebel against the unions' attempts to sabotage their struggle and block a combined fight. For teachers to mobilize their collective strength and that of the broader working class, however, requires new organizations: rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, which have long worked to enforce a pro-business status quo. An urgent task of such committees will be to draw up lists of demands based on what teachers actually require, not what the districts and the Democratic Party claim are affordable.



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