

Striking Minneapolis teachers express support for united struggle across Twin Cities

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Do you work at Minneapolis or St. Paul Public Schools? Tell us what you think about the deal with SPPS and conditions in your school. Comments will be published anonymously.

As Minneapolis teachers and school support staff carried out day one of their first strike in over 50 years Tuesday, schools in neighboring St. Paul remained open, after the St. Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) union announced a last-minute tentative agreement Monday night.

In a press conference announcing the deal, SPFE representatives claimed they had reached “an historic settlement” with the school district, saying it would limit class sizes, include mental health support and increase wages for hyper-exploited educational assistants. However, Joe Gothard, St. Paul Public Schools superintendent, stated that the agreement would fall “within the district’s budget and enrollment limitations,” signaling that the deal would be yet another austerity contract.

SPFE’s cancellation of the strike, no doubt coordinated with the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers and the American Federation of Teachers, aims at blocking a unified struggle of teachers in both cities and preventing it from developing into an open conflict with the Democratic Party, which dominates politics in the Twin Cities.

AFT President Randi Weingarten, who has been a leading advocate of an unsafe reopening of schools during the surge of the Delta and Omicron variants, has been intimately involved in the negotiations. Attempting to promote a narrative of an “unreasonable” Minneapolis administration versus a benevolent St. Paul, she tweeted, Tuesday night, “Minneapolis and St. Paul are ‘A Tale of Two Cities’ in the Twin Cities. In St. Paul, @spfe28 secured the schools #StPaulStudentsDeserve. In Minneapolis, @mft59 is still fighting for a #SafeAndStableMPS with a callous MPS.”

Educators in both St. Paul and Minneapolis, however, have expressed their determination to overturn the dire conditions in schools and had voted overwhelmingly in favor of a strike. Teachers and support staff are battling the SPPS and MPS to secure livable wages, resources for the mental health

of their students, manageable classroom sizes, and a major infusion of funds to supply necessary staffing and resources, as well as measures to protect against the ongoing dangers from COVID-19.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with teachers at picket lines at Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) on Tuesday, discussing the intolerable conditions educators and students face.

One teacher said that “students see mice, they should not see mice at school regularly.” Another teacher, commenting on the starving of funding and resources for schools, said, “We barely get funding for basic supplies. Sometimes we don’t even have soap or paper towels! This is how the district treats our kids!?”

Mark, an Education Support Professional (ESP), told the WSWS, “It might be hard for some people to believe, but some support staff make as low as \$24,000 a year, which is of course nowhere near enough to live in the city.” MIT indicates that roughly \$31,000 is required for a single adult with no children to earn a “living wage” in Minneapolis–St. Paul, while close to \$66,000 is required for an adult with one child.

Mark noted that he opposed the effort of the SPFE and MFT to break unity with St. Paul teachers. “I’ve been saying that St. Paul teachers should be at the table with us since the beginning,” he said, agreeing when a WSWS reporter stated that the call-off of the strike by the union amounted to sabotage.

Many students were also present at picket lines across MPS schools. WSWS reporters spoke to a student at Patrick Henry High School in North Minneapolis who expressed support for teachers. Speaking on the conditions in schools generated by the pandemic, she stated, “There have been some times when around half of the school is gone, or so many teachers aren’t there, and it’s hard on us.”

Notably, reporters encountered no mention among teachers of what the MFT is hailing as its main “radical” demand, the Memorandum of Agreement on the preferential hiring and firing of teachers based on race. The union is

attempting to obscure the actual demands of the teachers—including for a decent standard of living for all educators and the infusion of resources into public education—and is instead attempting to incite fratricidal struggles over jobs.

The effort to establish what are in effect racial quotas tacitly accepts the claims of the school district and the Democratic Party that “limited resources” prevent the needs of all teachers and students from being met, even as the corporations have seen record profits and US billionaires have accumulated trillions during the pandemic.

The SPFE has yet to release the details of their tentative agreement with the district. However, on Sunday, SPPS had released an outline of its latest contract proposal, which SPFE said it was considering in the run-up to the announcement of the tentative agreement.

It is not yet clear whether the agreement differs from SPPS’s weekend proposal, but a review of the outline is nonetheless illustrative of what the final agreement is likely to entail:

- COVID-19: Significantly, no mention is made in SPPS’s proposal of any protective measures against COVID-19, even as concerns mount among epidemiologists over the dangers posed by the BA.2 sub-variant of Omicron. In recent weeks, SPPS has dropped its contact tracing program.

- Wages: On wages for the most exploited section of educators, the SPPS proposal would eliminate the lowest-paid lane for educational assistants, which would nevertheless leave assistants with miserably low starting wages. The SPPS offered a one-time payment of \$2,000 for every SPFE employee for the year in May and June if the offer is ratified.

The proposal also supposedly would “give an additional raise to all SPFE employees equal to one-half of any increase the Legislature makes to the per-pupil funding formula during the current legislative session,” making additional raises dependent on state legislature, in effect no guarantee at all. SPFE had previously stated it was demanding just 2.5 percent per year in general wage increases, a massive cut in real wages with a current inflation rate of 7.5 percent.

- Class sizes: SPPS’s proposal does not introduce any new class size limits. Instead, it would merely incorporate the language from a Memorandum of Understanding attached to the previous contract.

- Mental health: On resources and staff for the mental health of students, the proposal commits to hiring “four additional school psychologists for the 2022-23 school year,” a pitiful gesture given the SPPS system’s 67 total schools. Additionally, it incorporates language stating

vaguely that it is “offering to maintain a mental health team serving each school.”

The strike in Minneapolis is part of a growing resurgence of working class militancy in opposition to poverty-level wages, degraded working conditions and, above all, the disastrous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through the school districts, teachers confront the Democratic Party, which has starved public schools of resources while promoting the expansion of for-profit charter schools, while handing major tax breaks to the banks and corporations, including Twin Cities-based companies such as Target and UnitedHealth. Now, the Democratic Party, the Biden administration, and sections of the Republican Party are recklessly escalating tensions with Russia over its reactionary invasion of Ukraine, seeking to channel social discontent outward against an “external” enemy.

The WSWS urges educators in both Minneapolis and St. Paul to seize the initiative and organize rank-and-file committees at every school, led by the most militant and trusted teachers. In doing so, teachers and school staff must maintain their independence from both the trade unions and the big business political parties, which have carried out a catastrophic response to the COVID-19 pandemic, prioritizing profits over human lives.

Mark, the ESP, agreed that the drive to keep schools open to in-person learning had nothing to do with the students’ well-being, “On top of the low pay for teachers and support staff, there is not enough staff—we don’t have enough mental health support for our students during the pandemic.”

Elaborating on the pandemic, Mark added, “Our schools are old and underfunded. There is not adequate ventilation...there’s no way we can provide a safe environment.”

“We have already dealt with a lot of loss in the past months.” He added, “Lots of kids have died from COVID and MPS ignores it.”



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