

Expand the Minneapolis educators strike! Mobilize the working class for higher wages and against war and the pandemic!

Marcus Day
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Do you work at Minneapolis or St. Paul Public Schools? Contact the WSWs and tell us about conditions in your school and what's at stake for you in this strike. Workers' identities will be kept confidential.

The strike by more than 4,000 Minneapolis, Minnesota, teachers and school support staff is set to enter its second week on Tuesday. The walkout, the most significant development in the class struggle in the United States currently underway, raises issues of crucial importance for workers everywhere.

Educators in the Twin Cities are determined to reverse the increasingly intolerable conditions in the schools. Educational support professionals (ESPs) have starting wages as low as \$24,000, far below what is needed to live a decent life in the city, compelling many to take second or even third jobs. Schools have grown increasingly understaffed, with nearly a quarter of support positions currently vacant, triple the number compared to 2018. Full-time teachers, meanwhile, have faced years of stagnating pay.

At the same time, educators are fighting for protections from COVID-19, which has enormously exacerbated the crisis in the schools. Since the 2016–17 school year, 2,300 Minneapolis teachers have left the district largely because of low pay and decaying conditions. The pace of early retirements and resignations has only accelerated since the pandemic.

Last year and into 2022, teachers and students were herded back and kept in classrooms during the catastrophic Delta and Omicron surges, with only a brief, two-week switch to remote learning in Minneapolis in January, in large part because there were simply not enough teachers who were not sick or in quarantine to continue in-person instruction.

Falsely touted as “mild,” the Omicron variant has nevertheless continued to kill teachers and even students, with the schools serving as transmission belts of the virus into the community. Twenty school staff and three students across Minnesota have died from COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic, according to Minnesota Department of Public Health data, including a teen from Hennepin County last fall.

The unfolding disaster at the beginning of the year prompted the courageous job action by Chicago teachers to force a return to remote instruction, as well as walkouts in a number of US cities by students demanding COVID-19 safety measures, including hundreds of high and middle school students in St. Paul in January.

Educators have heard no shortage of sanctimonious declarations by administrators and the political establishment that they are “essential.” But now, teachers are once again being told there is simply no money to meet their most basic needs or those of their students.

In a statement released over the weekend, Minneapolis Public Schools officials claimed that the latest contract proposal by the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers would “steer the district toward long-term financial crisis.”

The MFT, however, has already significantly walked back its demand for a 20 percent across-the-board raise for teachers in the first year of the agreement, dropping it to 12 percent last week and 11 percent over the weekend. The MPS has countered with a convoluted wage proposal designed to pit newer teachers against older and more highly paid educators, whom the district is hoping to force out.

In a revealing statement, MPS wrote that its proposed cost-of-living raises for teachers of 2 percent in each year of the two-year deal would match those included in the tentative agreement reached in neighboring St. Paul. That deal, announced by the St. Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) on the eve of a strike which was scheduled to coincide with the one in Minneapolis, has been hailed by both SPFE and MFT as a supposedly model agreement.

But with inflation running at 7.9 percent and projected to potentially reach double-digit percent increases later this year, a 2 percent raise would amount to a substantial cut in real pay, increasingly confronting educators with impossible decisions of which bill to pay.

Attempting to blackmail teachers and slander them for the attacks on school resources, Minneapolis school board chair Kim Ellison suggested last week that significant wage increases would require cuts elsewhere. In an effort to stoke up racial divisions, she added, “We all know where those cuts historically have happened. It's going to affect our students of color and our students most in need.”

The MFT, as well as the SPFE and their parent national organization, the American Federation of Teachers, have themselves been relentlessly seeking to present the assault on teachers and public education as primarily a racial issue. The MFT has promoted retrograde and divisive plans to base hiring and firing on race—implicitly rejecting a fight to secure a decent

standard of living for *all* teachers, regardless of the color of their skin.

The promotion of racial and identity politics to divide the working class has long been the stock-in-trade of the Democratic Party, in which the teacher unions are all deeply integrated.

There are plenty of resources to guarantee high quality public education for children and a decent standard of living to those who teach them and provide critical services as school support staff. Minnesota-based corporate giants have made windfall profits during the pandemic, including United Health Group (\$17.3 billion in 2021 profits), Best Buy (\$10.5 billion), Cargill (\$4.6 billion in 2021) and Target (\$1.4 billion in 2021). In addition, the bipartisan CARES Act handed trillions more to corporate America even as companies slashed payrolls.

While teachers are being told there is no money to pay them a living wage or supply their schools, enormous resources are being poured by both Democrats and Republicans into the war machine.

Last week, Congress passed a record bipartisan military funding package of close to a trillion dollars. The Biden administration and the NATO powers have seized on Putin's reactionary invasion of Ukraine to pour weapons into the country and use it as a killing field. The purpose of this is not to protect the Ukrainian people but to implement long-prepared plans by the US and NATO to economically and militarily subjugate Russia, even if it risks world war. Like Afghanistan, Iraq and other US military interventions, it will be the working class, including the youth, who suffer the catastrophic consequences.

A multi-pronged strategy is being carried out by the AFT and its president, Randi Weingarten, who is a key ally of the Biden administration. On the one hand, the Minneapolis teachers strike is being kept isolated, with a walkout by St. Paul teachers blocked last week despite widespread sentiment among school workers for a joint struggle.

On the other hand, the MFT and AFT are doing everything they can to channel opposition once again behind impotent appeals to the Democratic Party, even though it is the *very same* political party which for years has spearheaded the expansion of charter schools and deprived public schools of the necessary funding. While Minnesota Democratic Governor Tim Walz has postured as supporting increased state funding of schools, he knows full well that the Republican-controlled state senate will block or significantly water down his proposals, which at just a 2 percent increase in per-pupil funding are already completely inadequate.

Many educators may have felt a sense of relief at the election of Biden. But what has been the record of the administration? The abandonment of the struggle against the pandemic, the prioritization of corporate profit-making, the continuation of the vicious scapegoating and persecution of immigrants, the endless accommodation to the extreme right, and, most dangerously, the rapid escalation of militarism.

**Form rank-and-file committees of teachers and school staff!
Expand the strike throughout the Twin Cities and beyond!**

Teachers in the Twin Cities confront not just an intransigent school board and local politicians. They are objectively engaged in a struggle against the Democratic Party, and, at bottom, the capitalist system, which is looting public education and driving humanity to the brink of a third world war.

Educators can and must win their fight, but to do so requires new organizations and major reinforcements.

The unions, completely beholden to the Democratic Party, are not only incapable of conducting a serious struggle; they are also complicit in the deadly reopening of schools throughout the pandemic, a policy which has been carried out to force workers to remain on the job generating profits.

But teachers have already begun to organize independently to secure their needs, forming rank-and-file committees over the last year in order to coordinate their struggles for protection against the pandemic and decent working conditions. These committees have worked to link up educators across the country, sharing information and the lessons of their experiences.

An urgent appeal must be made to workers throughout the Twin Cities and beyond to mobilize in defense of the strike, including the hundreds of public defenders in Minneapolis who recently authorized a walkout, as well as the school food workers in MPS, whom the SEIU has refused to call out despite an overwhelming strike vote. Moreover, tens of thousands of teachers in the country's largest school districts, including New York and Los Angeles, face looming contract struggles this year, and will undoubtedly be strengthened by a genuine rebellion in Minneapolis.

The problems confronting teachers and school staff in Minneapolis—poverty wages, surging inflation, understaffing, grueling hours and the ever-present danger of COVID-19—are the same basic problems facing workers across the US and in other countries. Despite the attempts of the corporate media and the political establishment to turn public opinion against the Minneapolis strike, it enjoys widespread support within the working class.

The Twin Cities have a long and proud history of courageous battles by left-wing and socialist-minded workers, including the famous 1934 Minneapolis General Strike, which was led by the Trotskyist movement. These traditions of militant class struggle must be revived.

On Wednesday, the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the WSWS will host an online meeting, A call to all Midwestern educators: Support the Minneapolis teacher's strike! The meeting will review the latest developments in the Minneapolis teachers strike and outline an independent policy for the working class to mobilize behind the struggle. We urge all teachers and school staff in the Twin Cities and beyond to register today to attend.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact