

Details of St. Paul teachers union deal reveal austerity agreement

Anthony Bertolt, Marcus Day
16 March 2022

Join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the WSWS at an online meeting Wednesday at 7 p.m. Eastern, "A call to all Midwestern educators: Support the Minneapolis teacher's strike!"

The strike by more than 4,000 Minneapolis teachers and school support staff entered its second week this Tuesday, continuing their first walkout in over 50 years. Teachers are fighting for major wage increases, increased staffing to reduce classroom sizes and provide better support for students, more resources for schools and protections from the spread of COVID-19. Educators are pitted in a political struggle against the Democratic Party, which has imposed austerity in Minneapolis for decades and used Minnesota as ground zero in the expansion of for-profit charter schools.

The walkout in Minneapolis began on March 8 as part of what educators thought would be a joint strike with teachers in the neighboring city of St. Paul set to begin on the same day. However, the Saint Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) union announced a last-minute deal with Saint Paul Public Schools on March 7, blocking a unified struggle and leaving the strike in Minneapolis isolated.

At the time, SPFE officials hailed their deal as "an historic settlement," without releasing the full terms to the public. The Minnesota Federation of Teachers (MFT) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have repeatedly touted the agreement, calling on MPS to reach similar terms. Minnesota Democratic Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, in comments at a rally organized by the MFT on Tuesday, said that the SPFE deal is "proof that schools can be invested in."

However, the real details of the agreement, which have begun to be released to the local press in recent days, confirm the warnings by the *World Socialist Web Site* when the deal was announced that it would "fall far short of teachers' demands and be yet another austerity agreement."

According to the Twin Cities *Pioneer Press*, the proposed contract would include wage increases for teachers of just 2 percent for each year of the two-year contract—less than the already completely inadequate 2.5 percent raises SPFE had been calling for—plus one-time \$3,000 "retention" or "recognition" bonuses paid for out of the American Rescue Plan. The raises will be far below the inflation rate, currently at

7.9 percent and expected to rise, amounting to a major cut in real pay.

Education assistants (EAs) would receive two flat \$1-1.25 raises, with the lowest paid EAs seeing their wages increase from \$15.94 to \$18.85 in 2023, or roughly \$39,000 a year, with the lowest rung of "step and lane" wage rates eliminated. Depending on their pay grade, EAs will also either see their real pay decline, or almost entirely eaten up by inflation.

The remaining elements of the agreement which have thus far been revealed show that it remains well within the district's self-proclaimed "budgetary limitations," as Superintendent Joe Gothard boasted. Class sizes would nominally be reduced only for certain grades, K-3 and for high school freshmen. However, it is likely that even these limits will simply be ignored by administrators, as is often the case in schools throughout the US.

In addition, the deal will supposedly entail the hiring of just six more school psychologists, a drop in the bucket compared to the crying social need and distress throughout the schools, considering that two-thirds of St. Paul students are in poverty, and 300 are reported to be homeless.

Significantly, no mention has been made in initial press reports, nor in SPFE's statements about the deal, about any measures to protect against the spread of COVID-19, even as warnings mount among epidemiologists about the threat posed by the BA.2 subvariant of Omicron, which has driven the per capita mortality rate in Hong Kong to the highest in the world. Despite the false claims by the Democrats, Republicans, and corporate media that schools are safe and the pandemic in effect over (or soon to be over), cases are again beginning to rise in Europe, and wastewater surveillance testing has indicated that infections are growing in the US.

The St. Paul deal must be stated for what it is: a sellout agreement which is entirely within the framework of austerity demanded by the Democratic Party.

Teachers and EAs in St. Paul must organize immediately to build up support for a massive rejection of this contract, which would send a powerful statement that educators are drawing a line in the sand in the fight for their students, their families and their livelihoods! Such an act of defiance would immensely strengthen the position of teachers in both Minneapolis and St.

Paul and galvanize opposition among educators and workers throughout the country.

But to carry out this struggle, new organizations genuinely controlled by teachers are needed: rank-and-file committees, which will provide the organizational and logistical framework for teachers to share information outside “official” channels and coordinate their fight. Such committees must take as their starting point complete independence from the Democratic Party and the trade unions and proceed from the nonnegotiable needs of teachers and students for fully funded schools, living wages, adequate staffing, and genuine protections from COVID-19.

The strategy being pursued by the unions is to divide teachers and school workers, isolate the Minneapolis teachers, and promote illusions that the Democratic Party can be pressured to reverse course on its decades-long attack on public education.

On Wednesday, SEIU Local 284 announced that it had set a 10-day strike notice for approximately 200 food service workers in Minneapolis Public Schools. The SEIU has deliberately dragged out negotiations and stalled on setting a deadline for the walkout, despite workers voting by 98.5 percent to authorize a strike two weeks ago. With the SEIU unable to delay any longer, likely due to sentiment among low-paid food service workers to join the walkout, the strike notice is likely to be taken as a signal by the MFT and AFT to accelerate attempts to reach a miserable compromise with school administrators.

Despite the attempts to impose isolation on the strike, it is being met with growing support. Also on Wednesday, high school students participated in a march and sit-in in support of Minneapolis teachers. Leila Sundin, a student, told a local ABC news affiliate, “They’re fighting for us, they’re fighting for the community and they’re fighting for public schools.”

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to teachers demonstrating at the John B. Davis Education and Service Center, where the MPS board’s offices are, during protests over the weekend and on picket lines at various schools across Minneapolis this week.

Jill, an MPS teacher, rejected the prevailing media narrative that the danger from COVID-19 has abated. “The pandemic isn’t over. After winter break, the disease spread through the school. At one point, we would have around 15 teachers out at a time, sometimes almost half of the students would be in quarantine.” On class sizes, Jill spoke about how they “keep increasing, and they don’t have an upper limit.” Alex, another teacher, also pointed to ballooning class sizes, saying, “Some teachers have 50 students in their classrooms.”

Natalie, an elementary school teacher, said, “We want to move away from the status quo, which has been increasing course loads and less resources for the students. The students deserve better.”

She said that Minneapolis Democratic Mayor Jacob Frey “should not have been reelected. He hasn’t done anything to

help improve the situation with police violence in the community.” In the aftermath of the protests against the police murder of George Floyd, Frey became justifiably reviled by workers across the city for his oversight of ongoing police violence towards the working class in Minneapolis. Promising to decrease the rate of police funding prior to reelection, he has since increased funding for the police, with the support of the city council.

When WSWS reporters pointed to the connections between the drive to defund schools, the arming of the police, and ultimately the preparations for war by the Democrats and Republicans, Natalie replied, “War is not in the interests of the working class. Absolutely not, it affects the working class the most.”

A mother of Minneapolis students who joined striking teachers on the picket line in front of the Davis center told the WSWS, “I’m the daughter of a teacher. My mom went on strike in 1970, when it was illegal to strike. So, I’ve been raised by educators. This strike by Minneapolis teachers is very important to me.

“Things today are going backwards. We’re in the same place we were 50 years ago, if not worse. Back then we were involved in the Vietnam War. And now we have the same things happening again today.”

Minneapolis teachers must be prepared to reject any deal to shut down their strike and ram through an austerity contract by the MFT. Instead, Minneapolis teachers must turn towards the working class in the Twin Cities and across the US. The issues that educators face—poverty wages, unmanageable staffing and hours, and the increasing threat of COVID-19—are the same fundamental issues confronting the entire working class. Despite the corporate press attempts to pit educators against their communities, the strike has widespread support among workers and students.

Educators can and must win their struggle. This requires teachers to break with the Democratic Party and form new, rank-and-file organizations to lead their own struggle and unite with workers across the US and internationally in a fight against the capitalist system, the source of inequality, poverty and war.

Do you work at Minneapolis or St. Paul Public Schools? Contact the WSWS and tell us what you think about SPFE’s contract proposal and the conditions in your school. Comments will be published anonymously.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact