

Unions accelerate efforts to isolate and shut down Minneapolis teachers strike

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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. Educators' identities will be kept confidential.

As roughly 4,500 Minneapolis teachers continue their 11th day on the strike, the unions are ramping up their efforts to isolate the struggle and shut it down as quickly as possible, hoping to prevent the walkout from sparking a much broader movement of the working class and direct clash with the Democratic Party, under conditions of rapidly escalating preparations for war with Russia.

Both Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) and the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) have shifted tone in recent days, saying there has been progress in negotiations, with MFT President Greta Callahan stating Friday morning, "We are ready to make a deal."

In the surest sign that the unions are preparing to wrap up the strike and accept an agreement on the district's terms, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten joined MFT officials for their daily "strike update" video on Facebook Friday. Weingarten, as head of one of the two national teachers unions and a key figure in the Democratic Party, played a leading role in sabotaging a series of rebellions and strikes by teachers in 2018-2019, and has served as an enforcer of the White House's criminal policy of reopening schools to in-person instruction during the pandemic.

The entire framework of austerity and surrender to the pandemic on offer in the Twin Cities must be repudiated by educators. With the MFT and AFT preparing to reach a sellout agreement, there is no time to lose.

Teachers and support staff must take the initiative now and move to form independent rank-and-file committees to take control of the strike themselves. An urgent appeal should be made to MPS food service workers, public defenders in Minneapolis who have also authorized a strike, Allina nurses and health care workers, Amazon workers, and others to join and expand their struggle for good-paying jobs for all, protections from COVID-19 and humane working conditions.

The deal reached in St. Paul provides a foretaste of what is being prepared in Minneapolis. On Wednesday, the St. Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) announced that a tentative agreement with the school district in the neighboring city had been ratified. SPFE has not released the vote totals, stating only that the deal was "overwhelmingly ratified."

The SPFE, the MFT, the AFT and Democratic Party politicians such as Congresswoman Ilhan Omar have all touted the deal, claiming that it makes major investments in schools. "This contract is proof that educators and district leaders can come together to give students the

resources they need and educators the recognition they deserve," SPFE President Leah VanDassor wrote in a statement.

Weingarten, who has been closely involved in the negotiations in both Minneapolis and St. Paul, wrote in an op-ed in the *Minnesota Star Tribune* on March 14, "It's a tale of two cities in the Twin Cities. In St. Paul, while there were protracted negotiations, the district finally agreed to a tentative agreement on many of the things that Minneapolis educators say they need for their students."

In reality, the St. Paul deal is an austerity agreement which will leave schools disarmed in the face of future surges of COVID-19.

The contract will raise teachers' pay just 2 percent in each year of the two-year deal, far below the current inflation rate of 7.9 percent, along with a one-time \$3,000 bonus. Low-paid education assistants (EAs) will receive an average raise of 13.5 percent over the two-year deal, also amounting to a cut in real pay when inflation is taken into account.

The restrictions on class sizes, much-boasted by the union, are virtually unchanged from the caps in the previous contract, and are riddled with loopholes. Limits will be lowered by just one student for grades 1-3, and a limit established of 35 or 36 for "9th grade courses."

However, in all likelihood the caps will be routinely flouted. The agreement states, "The parties acknowledge that circumstances could arise where exceptions to the above class size averages or caps may be made. Such cases may include efforts to keep families together, enrollment patterns, population shifts, a decrease in state or federal funding, an unusual variation between school enrollments at different grade levels or to allow the district to avoid creating split grade level classes."

A union-administration "class size committee" will oversee the process of determining which "exceptions" are allowable, and a number of clauses in the contract state that SPFE agrees not to file grievances while various remedies are considered for excessive class sizes. In essence, the limits will remain largely a dead letter, with the process for "remedying" the situation dragged out for months or years.

Significantly, no mention whatsoever is made in SPFE's "bargaining proposal tracker" of COVID-19 or increased protections from the spread of the virus in schools, in line with the efforts of the teachers unions, the political establishment and the corporate media to falsely present the pandemic as over. St. Paul Public Schools in fact ceased contact tracing as of March 4, eliciting no discernible objection from SPFE.

Epidemiologists are already warning of another possible wave from the BA.2 subvariant of Omicron, which has driven a new surge in Europe and caused the mortality rate in Hong Kong to spike to the

highest in the world, overwhelming morgues. Already, every month in 2022 child deaths from COVID have increased in the US.

Earlier this year, after over a year of negotiations, St. Paul and Minneapolis teachers overwhelmingly voted for an open-ended strike in order to secure their demands for adequate staffing levels, livable wages, resources for classrooms and mental health support, and necessary measures to combat the spread of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the SPFE announced a last-minute deal the day before the strike was set to begin. The details of the agreement, which meets none of teachers' or students' needs, demonstrate that the blocking of the strike was part of a deliberate effort by the unions to isolate Minneapolis and St. Paul teachers from each other and enforce the Democratic Party's demands for austerity and mass infection from COVID-19 in both cities.

On Thursday, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 284 also announced a tentative agreement for food service workers at Minneapolis Public Schools. Despite a near-unanimous strike vote by the low-paid workers at the beginning of the month, the SEIU stalled for two weeks before setting a strike deadline, only issuing a 10-day notice for a walkout on March 15.

The contract in St. Paul and the one being prepared in Minneapolis are a prelude to major cuts and attacks on educators' jobs in both school districts. In December, St. Paul's school board voted to approve a plan to close or reorganize six schools. Referring to a "fiscal cliff" in the district's budget, St. Paul Public Schools Chief Financial Officer Marie Schrul said in February, "We know that the shortfall is a large number. We are working on multiple scenarios right now. We don't have the answers either to entirely mitigate the shortfall." The board is supposed to meet this month to discuss potential cost-saving measures.

In Minneapolis, meanwhile, district Superintendent Ed Graff has repeatedly stated that "difficult decisions," i.e., layoffs or cuts, will have to be made.

The state and federal government, under both Democratic and Republican administrations, have starved schools of funding for decades. The political establishment has deliberately created a vicious cycle, with falling enrollment, as parents withdraw their children from the severely under-resourced schools, used as further justification for more rounds of layoffs and school closures. At the same time, funds have been siphoned off to for-profit charter schools.

As MPS and MFT negotiations continue, MPS published details about their latest "equity" proposal to the MFT on Wednesday. Notably, the first and most prominent proposal that both parties in principle agree on is a "Educators of Color Memorandum of Agreement," which attempts to create preferences for hiring and firing of educators on the basis of race.

Instead of carrying a struggle to unite all workers and defend the jobs of all their members, the MFT has pushed reactionary demands to supposedly protect the jobs of black educators at the expense of their counterparts of other races and ethnicities. The divisive measure would have the effect of pitting teachers in a fratricidal struggle over jobs, while allowing the Democratic Party's campaign of austerity, layoffs and school closures to proceed apace. Obscenely, the proposed memorandum has been presented by the union and pseudo-left organizations such as the Democratic Socialists of America, Left Voice, and Socialist Alternative (which has members of the MFT bargaining committee) as a progressive demand.

It must be stated plainly: Teachers are not in a conflict only with the

MPS and the local Minneapolis city government, but with the entire Democratic Party and the capitalist system. The unions subordinate teachers to the Democratic Party, a party of Wall Street and war, which in turn is intent on carrying out an escalation of the austerity measures that it has overseen for decades.

Teachers and support staff in Minneapolis have continued to speak out on the intolerable conditions in the schools. On the picket lines, an educational support professional (ESP) working in MPS told a reporter for the *World Socialist Web Site*, "No educators should have to work two jobs." Pointing to her husband, who was a bus driver for the city, she stated, "I'm able to survive because of my husband's income and mine combined, but there's no way a young single person could live [on the wages for ESPs]."

Speaking on wages, increasing class sizes and inadequate staffing, an MPS elementary teacher told the WWS, "I had 31 first graders in my class for months until our parents advocated enough to have another section added. Now I am at 18 students and can meet their needs. We still have kindergarten classes with 25-plus students. This is one reason we must have contractual language around class size/caseload.

"Our ESPs make our school run. They help with everything from supporting academics in the classroom, to processing student conflict/feelings, to recess duty, to interpreting conversations with parents, to supporting students with special needs. We have had openings all year that we can't fill. One of our beloved staff members left because she simply couldn't afford to live on the money she was being paid. It was heartbreaking for everyone.

"There are so many more examples. Some ESPs are living out of their cars.

"We had a lot of classrooms quarantining throughout. I have been fortunate, so I have not contracted COVID. I can't even begin to describe the impact of this pandemic on myself and my family.

"I think COVID really highlighted the structural problems of how MPS is run and the treatment of folks that were deemed essential but continue to be underpaid."



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