

Why teachers should oppose the Minneapolis Public Schools-MFT “Educators of Color” memorandum

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Under conditions of growing anger among educators over widespread poverty and inequality, an unending pandemic, ongoing police violence, and increasingly disastrous conditions in the schools, both the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) and Minneapolis Public Schools have been negotiating a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that prioritizes race in decisions over layoffs or “excesses” (i.e., when a position at a school is eliminated, but an educator may apply for other job openings in the district).

The MOA would create exemptions centered around race that would allow the school district to circumvent seniority protections in determining who would be subject to layoff. A December 9, 2021, draft of the MFT’s proposed MOA states, “If the placing of any educator on layoff or nonrenewal before another teacher would prevent students from having access to educators of color and/or educators who reflect the diversity of enrolled students, the district may excess or non-renew educators at the site, out of seniority order in order to protect educators who fall into [one or more categories].”

The categories—including “Alumni of Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities, and/or Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) programs”—have been formulated in such a way as to attempt to avoid violating civil rights laws prohibiting workforce reductions which discriminate based on race.

MPS has welcomed the proposal, having primarily tactical differences over how broad the exemptions to seniority rules should be. School board negotiators have proposed additional so-called “equity” measures purportedly aimed at “retaining staff of color,” including another memorandum titled “Black Men Teach.” MPS’ summary of that proposal states, “This MOA proposes identifying two partnership elementary schools where vacancies will be held for fellows from Black Men Teach, a community partner organization that recruits, prepares, places, and retains Black male educators in elementary schools.”

The “Educators of Color” MOA and related proposals are thoroughly reactionary and anti-working class. They have nothing to do with a struggle against racism or for social justice, whatever the proponents of the MOA may think. The effect of such measures, were they to be implemented, would be to pit educators against each other along racial lines and enormously damage the struggle for genuine equality. This outcome is in fact the desired aim of the Democratic Party, which has long used identity and racial politics as a wedge in a divide-and-conquer strategy against the working class.

While presented under the guise of defending the jobs of the most vulnerable and oppressed, the consequence of these policies will be to undermine the job security and democratic rights of *all* education workers.

The corporate-backed school “reform” campaign

As an initial matter, seniority and tenure rights of teachers have long been in the crosshairs of corporate-backed education “reform” advocates. The promoters of for-profit charter schools, regressive merit-pay systems and related attacks on public education also wish to make it easier to force out older, higher-paid and more experienced educators.

Knowing that such measures are deeply unpopular, the financial aristocracy has cultivated and funded a network of “community organizations” to carry out its dirty work. Increasingly, these groups have cloaked their efforts to dismantle public education under the mantle of “racial equity.” The current proposals are no exception.

Local media in Minneapolis have referred in a number of reports to supposed grassroots activists and organizations promoting the “educators of color” MOA. An NBC news report on February 21 refers to the efforts of the “Advancing Equity Coalition” and “Educators for Excellence” to lobby the MFT and MPS to sign the MOA even in advance of a full contract.

The Advancing Equity Coalition (AEC) states on its website that it “is a multiracial, multicultural movement of families, students, teachers, and community members working together to dismantle systemic racism at MPS.” Among the members of this “movement” are the Mortenson Family Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the corporate dynasty that owns the multi-billion-dollar M.A. Mortenson Company, one of the largest construction and real estate development firms in the US. Another “coalition member” is the Graves Foundation, which funds numerous local education “reform” organizations as well as charter schools, according to Minneapolis education blog Bright Light Small City.

Kenneth Eban, executive director of AEC, previously served as organizing director of the Minnesota chapter of “Students for Education Reform,” a pro-charter school organization that spent tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars nationally to elect pro-“reform” candidates to school boards, according to Chalkbeat and the *Los Angeles Times*.

Educators for Excellence, for its part, is the recipient of millions in funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which the Microsoft billionaire has used for years to bankroll school privatization campaigns. The national chair of the group, Peter Flaherty, is managing director of Arcon Partners, LLC, a major private investment firm.

One can select any one of the numerous “racial equity community organizations” more or less at random and almost invariably find behind it powerful corporate and political interests. Black Men Teach, the group MPS is proposing to partner with and presumably channel school funds to, includes the following individuals on its board of directors:

- Anthony Lando, Black Men Teach Board Chair and Senior Vice

President of the Private Client Division at Bank of America:

According to his bio, Lando “works with very successful business owners, ultra high net worth families, and philanthropic institutions, tailoring strategies to address their needs.”

• Paul Gunderson, Vice President/Human Resources, Coca-Cola Enterprises, retired.

• Mark Irvin, Chief Inclusion, Diversity and Talent Officer/Best Buy Co. Inc.

• Kevin Idahor, Accenture: In his position for the global consulting firm, Idahor leads “clients through enterprise transformation with a focus on HR Transformation, journey management, and leadership engagement interventions to minimize disruption.”

• Joshua Crosson, Executive Director at EdAllies: Crosson states that he “spent four years writing legislation and advising his hometown congressman, Rep. Adam Smith.” Smith, a Democrat, is the current chair of the House Armed Services Committee, a highly politically sensitive position from the standpoint of the military-intelligence apparatus.

The unholy nexus of phony “community organizations,” racial politics, school privatization, Wall Street and the Democratic Party is not new. They found their most significant expression in the administration of Barack Obama. Hailed by innumerable pseudo-left organizations as the first black president who would promote “change,” Obama proceeded to implement the reactionary “Race to the Top” school reform agenda, intensifying the pro-charter and “edu-business” policies of his Republican predecessor while overseeing the layoff of hundreds of thousands of teachers across the US during his two terms.

The efforts to promote organizations such as “Black Men Teach” do not advance the interests of the working class, but rather privileged sections of the upper-middle class. The “equity” industry offers such layers the possibility of lucrative contracts, highly paid advisory positions at schools and corporations, and other sources of income.

The promotion of “black capitalism” has long been used by the ruling class to create a bulwark for the profit system and the status quo within sections of the black petty bourgeoisie, with Republican President Richard Nixon famously calling in 1968 for giving the black middle class “a piece of the action in the exciting ventures of private enterprise.”

In the more recent period, groups such as Black Lives Matter have received massive amounts of funding from powerful sections of the ruling class, including \$100 million from the Ford Foundation. Inevitably, the frenzied pursuit of wealth among the layers who control the organization have resulted in grubby financial scandals, with the genuine victims of police violence, such as the mother of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, accusing the group of using their loved ones to make money.

With the onset of the pandemic, anger over inequality and police violence within the working population has taken on an explosive new dimension. The horrific murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis in May 2020 provoked outrage among masses of people, sparking multiracial and multiethnic protests in virtually every major and even mid-sized US city, among the largest demonstrations in the country’s history. Moreover, the protests quickly spread internationally, with workers and young people all over the world recognizing in the injustice of Floyd’s killing the intolerable conditions in their own countries.

Aware that they sit on a social powder keg and increasingly concerned over the growth of strikes and other forms of class struggle, the Democratic Party and its adjunct organizations have promoted racial and identity politics ever-more ferociously, in an effort to short circuit the unification of the working class and cover up the profound class divisions in society. The falsifications of history contained in the *New York Times’* 1619 Project, which falsely asserts that “white racism” and the struggle between races are the defining characteristics of American history, have been a key element of this strategy.

The conditions in MPS

Minneapolis educators are confronting a disastrous situation in the district. According to MPS, two-thirds of its students live in poverty, many of them either black or from immigrant populations. Over 2,300 students were identified by the district as being homeless at some point during the 2019-2020 school year, approximately 6 percent of the total number of students at the time.

Homelessness and poverty have increasingly plagued not only students, but also educators. Educational support professionals (ESPs)—including workers such as special education assistants and bilingual program aides—have wages as low as \$24,000. Many have been forced to take on second or third jobs, and some to sleep in their cars. Full-time teachers, meanwhile, have seen their pay stagnate year over year, failing to keep up with the rising cost of living.

The school board and administrators, and behind them the Democratic Party, are once again claiming there is simply not enough money to meet educators’ needs. As has become more and more the norm throughout the US, the district is threatening cuts should it raise wages even modestly. Superintendent Ed Graff has repeatedly asserted that “difficult decisions” will have to be made in relation to MPS’ budget shortfall and that consideration of layoffs and school closures are “unavoidable.” MPS has floated laying off approximately 180 workers a year over the next five years, beginning with 134 staff cuts this year.

The claim that there is no money to fully fund public education and provide *all* educators a decent standard of living is a fraud. Corporate profits have surged since 2020, and the stock market remains near all-time highs. For two years of the pandemic, educators have been needlessly exposed to COVID-19, with countless becoming severely ill or dying, while being repeatedly told they were “essential.” But now, the only thing on offer for teachers and the working class students is austerity.

The proponents of racial preferences in hiring and firing accept the fraudulent argument that there must be layoffs and school closures.

In the late 1960s, when the unions still could be said to defend the day-to-day interests of workers, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City opposed the demands of black nationalists for “community control” of schools, the elimination of seniority rights, and the firing of white, Jewish teachers to make way for black teachers. Today, however, MFT and its counterparts nationally are in the forefront of a campaign to sow racial divisions between teachers, students and their parents.

The unions, which have become evermore integrated into the corporations and the capitalist state, are now incapable of conducting a genuine struggle against racism, which requires the fight for the unity of workers of all races on the basis of their common class interests.

The effort to present “systemic racism” as the fundamental problem facing schools, as both the MFT and MPS have repeatedly done, is a diversion from the real source of the crisis—capitalism. And whether it’s said outright or not, the insinuation is that the dreadful conditions in high-poverty schools and the ultra-low wages of education support professionals are the fault of “white” educators and the “white” population as a whole.

In their more unguarded comments, the advocates of racial preferences in hiring and firing assert that children and students should have “teachers who reflect their students’ identities,” or teachers who “look like them.” But where do such ideas lead? Do white students also need to have teachers who “look like them?” Is it also “damaging” for them if they do not? Would it be better if each race had their own schools?

Such arguments have a logic of their own. Should racial preferences be extended as well to private businesses and other organizations? Should white workers be fired first? Should workplaces also be segregated along

racial lines?

Any form of politics which seeks to base itself on race as the essential category in society, rather than class, inevitably develops the most reactionary implications. Moreover, the encouragement of racial resentment and “blame” plays directly into the hands of the extreme right.

The effort to stoke racial divisions, under the anodyne slogan of “recruiting and retaining educators of color,” has been presented by pseudo-left organizations such as the Democratic Socialists of America, Left Voice, and Socialist Alternative as a progressive or even left-wing measure. These organizations, all oriented to or directly integrated into the Democratic Party, represent the interests of the upper-middle class. They are fundamentally opposed to conducting what is an elementary task of socialists, namely, the fight for the unification of the working class of all races, ethnicities, and nationalities, which requires unrelentingly opposition to racial politics, whether in the form of outright fascism or its more insidious identity politics guise.

Teachers of all races should reject the race-based MOA supported by MPS and the MFT. All efforts to divide teachers and other workers along racial lines must be opposed.

A genuinely progressive response to the crisis in public education is based not on dividing up ever-dwindling resources based on race, but rather on massively expanding funding for schools, training and hiring thousands more teachers, and dramatically raising all their wages to a livable income. These resources will not be secured through appeals to the Democratic Party, but rather in a struggle against it, and a fight for the socialist reorganization of economic life, based on social need and not private profit.



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