

Minneapolis School Board, Democratic Party demand millions in budget cuts in provocation against striking educators

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Are you an educator in the Minneapolis Public Schools? We want to hear from you: Contact the WSWS and tell us what you think about the board's "last, best and final offer." Comments will be published anonymously.

With the strike by approximately 4,500 teachers and school support staff in Minneapolis having entered its third week, the Democratic Party-dominated Minneapolis School Board is throwing down the gauntlet and redoubling its demands for austerity, provocatively insisting that even meager wage increases be offset by millions in budget cuts.

This weekend, the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) put forth its "last, best and final offer" for low-paid educational support professionals (ESPs), stating that it will be predicated on at least \$10 million in cuts to the school budget. ESPs make as little as \$24,000 currently, forcing them to take on second or third jobs and some even into homelessness.

On Sunday, MPS board Chair Kim Ellison said in an announcement, "Even though it puts us beyond what we have in resources, which means we will have to make budget cuts in the future, we have presented a 'last, best and final offer' to the ESPs that we believe represents their value." In a statement the same day, the board wrote, "MPS is reaching beyond its financial means on behalf of our ESPs and will need to make more than \$10 million in reductions for the next school year as a result."

MPS Superintendent Ed Graff has indicated previously in board meetings this year that "hard decisions" will have to be made, pointing to the MPS's budget deficit, and the district has floated the possibility of roughly 180 layoffs a year over the next five years.

Teachers and staff should reject this provocation with the contempt it deserves. Amid soaring corporate profits and a nearly \$10 billion state budget surplus, the claim that there is "no money" to provide educators a decent standard of living and expand funding for public education is a lie.

There are more than enough resources to provide all educators with a living wage, hire hundreds more teachers, and massively expand mental health and other necessary programs. The necessary resources, however, are being hoarded by an

unimaginably wealthy financial aristocracy, whose interests are being defended by both the Democratic and Republican parties.

In other words, teachers confront a political struggle over how, and in whose interests, society's resources will be used.

The attempt to offset inadequate wage increases with budget cuts follows a playbook increasingly utilized by districts in recent years, a strategy aimed at pitting students and their families against educators and shifting the blame onto them for school cuts. The teacher unions, including the national American Federation of Teachers, have played the crucial role in working to demobilize opposition to these attacks.

In 2019, Oakland, California's school board voted to pass budget cuts of \$22 million the day after a tentative agreement with the Oakland Educators Association (OEA) was ratified, amid widespread opposition among teachers. Educators had been picketing at the school board headquarters to prevent the cuts from being passed, but after the TA was ratified, the president of the OEA, Keith Brown, ordered them to go home.

In the current struggle in Minneapolis, MPS wage increase proposals for ESPs would still be utterly inadequate. Some ESPs would see a raise of just 8.2 percent over two years, which would come out to about an annual 4 percent cut in real pay or more with inflation currently at 7.9 percent a year. The average raise for support staff, according to the district, would be 15.6 percent over two years, also below the current inflation rate.

An elementary teacher in Minneapolis rejected the board's attempt to blackmail educators, telling the WSWS, "If their only way to be 'fiscally responsible' is [to] exploit workers, specifically ESPs, bus drivers, and food service workers, by only paying poverty wages, that is no longer going to be accepted."

In addition to the paltry raises, the board's offer would reduce the number of ESP job classifications from 17 to four, aimed at piling on even more job duties onto already overworked support staff.

On Tuesday, the Minneapolis school board announced that it had also submitted a "last, best and final offer" for licensed teachers. The proposal would raise pay by varying amounts

depending on the number of years of experience. Teachers with up to six years of experience would see cost-of-living raises of 5-12 percent in the first year of the deal, while those with more than six years would only receive 2.25 percent, in a blatant attempt to pit older, higher paid teachers against newer colleagues. In the second year, all teachers would receive a cost-of-living raise of only 2.25 percent.

The Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) released a video statement on the proposals Tuesday night, with MFT President Greta Callahan saying, “We received a ‘last, best and final offer’ from the district to the teacher chapter tonight, and it was the exact same proposal they had sent over last night at midnight.”

Indicating that the union has largely sought to accommodate the district’s demands, Callahan continued, “We thought long and hard and had a lot of hard conversations. We know how important it is for us to get kids back to school and to settle this contract. And so, we put it all on the table. We put something on the table that we know and believe MPS could accept to get our kids back in school.” District negotiators, however, walked out of talks after receiving the counteroffer, Callahan said.

Significantly, the MFT has remained silent on the board’s demands for \$10 million in cuts, signaling its de facto acceptance of them.

The arrogance and hard line of the district—and behind them, the Democratic Party administrations of Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz and President Joe Biden—demonstrate the bankruptcy of the strategy being pursued by the MFT. The union has sought to channel teachers’ opposition behind fruitless appeals to Democratic Party politicians, even though the Democrats for decades have overseen the starvation of public education and expansion of for-profit charter schools. By the MFT’s own admission, teachers have not received more than a 2 percent cost-of-living raise a year for 21 years—a damning self-indictment of the union’s record.

In fact, accepting the “inevitability” of budget cuts is the framework in which the reactionary Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) on “Educators of Color” has been proposed by the MFT. The MOA would undermine seniority protections and divides educators along racial lines.

The ruthless moves by the Minneapolis school board come amid, and are a response to, a growing mood of militancy and combativeness among teachers.

On Wednesday, nearly 5,000 teachers and staff are set to begin a strike in Sacramento, California. As in Minneapolis and cities throughout the country, teachers in Sacramento confront a disastrous situation in the schools, above all the ongoing impact of COVID-19, and demands that their living standards decline. The district has been fined by the state for forcing staff who test positive for COVID-19 to report to work; staff shortages due to the pandemic have resulted in children being “warehoused” in auditoriums and cafeterias without instruction; and the

superintendent has demanded pay freezes for the next five years.

Teachers are not only fighting against MPS and the local government, but the Democratic Party and the entire capitalist system, which is demanding lower pay, worsening conditions and the abrogation of all protections against COVID-19 in order to keep profits flowing. Workers around the world are facing increasingly brutal repression of their struggles as the ruling class prepares for war with Russia, from a court injunction blocking strike action by BNSF rail workers, to the lockout of Canada Pacific railworkers in Canada, to the mass firing of ferry workers in the United Kingdom last week.

In order to win, teachers must take matters into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file strike committees, and expand their struggle, linking up with educators across the country. An urgent appeal must be made for the mobilization of broader sections of workers seeking to combat low wages and intolerable working conditions, including nurses and health care workers, Amazon workers, rail and transport workers and others.

Despite the attempts of the school board and corporate media to turn public opinion against teachers, the strike continues to enjoy widespread support among working class families. An MPS parent told the WSWS at a demonstration last week, “I think the strike and where we are now is the result of a much longer time scale than what has happened only in the past year. It’s been decades of neglect, financially. And I think that’s a failure of the Minnesota leadership, from the legislators, to the governor, to our mayor, and down to the school superintendent. All have responsibilities for the failure of our public schools. What we’re dealing with now has been coming for a long time.

“I support the Minneapolis teachers. I have a freshman and 7th grader in the Minneapolis School District. And every year that goes by, I see a degradation of the schools’ programs and support. Everything that used to make the school system great is being degraded.

“It’s worrisome. Because some families leave the district, and then it gets worse. And then others leave and it gets worse, and still others leave and it gets worse. It’s almost like a death spiral. So we need leadership to get us out of that.”



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