

Form rank-and-file strike committees to expand the struggle!

Minneapolis educators strike at crossroads as MFT reaches deal to end walkout

Marcus Day

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Are you an educator in Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS)? We want to hear from you: Contact the WSWs and tell us what you think about the announcement of the tentative agreement and the rush to vote this weekend. Comments will be published anonymously.

Update:

Early Friday morning, the Minneapolis Public School Board and the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers union (MFT) announced that they had reached a tentative agreement, in a bid to end the courageous 18-day strike by educators in the city.

In a statement, the school board wrote that it “looks forward to welcoming students and staff back to school on Monday, March 28, pending a Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) membership vote. A tentative contract agreement has been reached with the MFT and Education Support Professionals (ESPs), ending the strike.”

The MFT is seeking to ram through the deal in votes this weekend, providing teachers and support staff virtually no time to carefully study the contract’s terms. In its own statement, the MFT claimed that it had won “historic agreements” with “major gains” in pay for support staff, classroom size caps, and mental health support. The press release also touted “protections for educators of color,” which in fact is a reactionary and divisive scheme to create racial preferences in hiring and firing. The Memorandum of Agreement would pit educators against each along racial lines, undermining both teachers’ seniority rights and the unity of workers.

Statements by the MFT earlier this week—that their counter-offers were “within the parameters” of the board’s self-proclaimed budgetary constraints—mean that the tentative agreement will inevitably be an austerity contract which fails to meet the needs of educators and students. Moreover, it will open the door to new rounds of cuts and layoffs, with the board in recent weeks floating \$10 million in budget reductions and hundreds of layoffs over the next five years.

As the statement below, published on the WSWs Thursday night, explains:

With such clear signs that an austerity agreement is being prepared, the biggest mistake would be for educators to adopt a wait-and-see attitude, and hope against all available evidence that the union will somehow bring back a contract which meets their needs.

The urgent task facing striking Minneapolis educators is to move now to organize independently by forming rank-and-file strike committees at every school...Teachers must demand at least a week, while the strike continues, to carefully study any contract proposal before voting. Such a demand is entirely reasonable, with

the future of educators and their students at stake.

We urge educators in Minneapolis to sign up today to discuss with us the formation of such rank-and-file committees and the way forward for the strike. The WSWs will continue to publish more information on the tentative agreement Friday as it becomes available.

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The Minneapolis Public School Board and MFT are rapidly approaching a settlement that would fail to meet the needs of striking educators and their students and instead impose the Democratic Party’s demands for austerity.

Approximately 4,500 teacher and Educational Support Professionals (ESPs) have been striking in Minneapolis for 17 days, one of the longest walkouts by educators in a major US city in recent history. Educators walked out for major pay increases, significant reductions in class sizes and school psychologist and special education caseloads, protections from COVID-19, and a substantial infusion of resources to hire more teachers and expand public education.

Minneapolis educators are in the forefront of an emerging wave of struggles by teachers. On Wednesday, nearly 5,000 educators in Sacramento, California, walked out, fighting for higher wages and improved staffing. As in other cities, teacher absences and resignations due to COVID-19 in Sacramento have been so severe that children have been “warehoused” in auditoriums and cafeterias without instructors, so their parents can continue working to generate profits.

In both Minneapolis and Sacramento—as well as in Los Angeles and New York City, where major battles over contracts loom later this year—teachers find themselves engaged in a political struggle against the Democratic Party, which along with the Republicans has overseen decades of school privatization, expansion of for-profit charters, and the starving of public education.

In Minneapolis, the school board has announced a series of insulting “last, best and final” offers for both teachers and ESPs over the past week. The proposals would keep highly exploited support staff on poverty wages, throttle teachers’ raises far below the current rate of inflation and do nothing to meaningfully reduce class sizes. Moreover, a “COVID Memorandum of Agreement” included in the offer is shot through with loopholes (e.g., social distancing will be maintained “when possible”; staff will have access to masks “when supplies permit”) and would expire in August this year.

Thus, educators would continue to be subjected needlessly to exposure to COVID, under conditions in which epidemiologists are warning of a potential new wave in the US from the BA.2 Omicron subvariant, which is already sweeping Europe and Asia.

The school district has repeatedly declared there is simply no money to meet educators' demands, despite a nearly \$10 billion budget surplus in Minnesota, as well as a dramatic run-up in profits for Twin Cities-based corporate giants like Target, UnitedHealthcare and Cargill during the pandemic.

Most significantly, the board has stated that the wage increases in its contract proposal would require \$10 million in budget cuts in a blatant effort to pit educators against students and their parents. School officials have already signaled layoffs are on the agenda, with initial estimates of 134 job losses this year and 180 a year over the next five years.

The district's negotiators, speaking on behalf of the corporate and political establishment, have issued what amount to a series of ruthless ultimatums to teachers: "Suck it up! Enough with your unreasonable demands for living wages and money for education! Back to school and business as usual!"

But educators have not been striking for more than two weeks only to see their living standards and classroom conditions deteriorate still further over the next two years. There are more than enough resources to guarantee good living standards to educators and for a vast increase—not reduction—in funding to lower class sizes, hire more teachers and staff, and improve learning conditions for students.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Democrats and Republicans have found trillions of dollars to bail out the giant corporations and financial markets and to pay for bombs, warships and other killing machines. While a million people died from COVID, billionaires in the US have accumulated an additional \$1.7 trillion in net worth during the pandemic.

Far from waging a serious struggle, the MFT, and its parent organization the American Federation of Teachers, accept without question the "need" for austerity. That is because the unions and the Democratic Party they support will do nothing that encroaches on the private fortunes of America's ruling class and the corrupt layers of the upper middle class that benefit from the exploitation of working people. But all of history, including the heroic struggles of the working class in Minneapolis during the 1930s, prove that nothing can be won without the most determined struggle against the entrenched wealth and power of the corporate and financial elites.

Behind closed doors, the MFT has been working with district negotiators to reach an agreement that betrays teachers' entirely justifiable demands. On Tuesday night, MFT President Greta Callahan signaled that the union was attempting to accommodate to the terms in the "last, best and final offer," saying in a video statement, "We thought long and hard and had a lot of hard conversations. ... We put something on the table that we know and believe MPS could accept to get our kids back in school." The district, however, took a hard line, walking out of mediation sessions after receiving the union's counteroffer.

Over the course of Wednesday, spokespeople for both the school district and the MFT went largely silent. Media reports indicated that virtual mediation sessions continued that evening.

On Thursday morning, the tone of MFT officials had markedly changed. Saying they were close to a deal, Callahan reiterated, "What we put on the table is within their parameters and what they can accept." MFT ESP chapter President Shaun Laden indicated that an agreement may be reached as soon as Thursday night.

A deal that is within the "parameters" artificially dictated by the school board and the political establishment can only mean the further starvation and immiseration of teachers and schools.

With such clear signs that an austerity agreement is being prepared, the biggest mistake would be for educators to adopt a wait-and-see attitude, and hope against all available evidence that the union will somehow bring back a contract which meets their needs.

The urgent task facing striking Minneapolis educators is to move now to

organize independently by forming rank-and-file strike committees at every school. Educators and support staff must be on guard against any attempt to shut down their strike prior to a vote on a tentative agreement or attempts by the union to rapidly ram one through. Teachers must demand at least a week, while the strike continues, to carefully study any contract proposal before voting. Such a demand is entirely reasonable, with the future of educators and their students at stake.

The emergence of the strike in Sacramento points the way forward. Rank-and-file committees would provide the means for embattled teachers to link up, share information and coordinate their struggles outside official channels. Teachers must appeal to students and workers in the region and throughout the country to break the isolation of the Minneapolis strike. Educators are fighting not just for themselves, but for the interests of the entire working class.

In recent days, Minneapolis teachers have voiced mounting concerns about the lack of information on negotiations provided by the MFT, as well as the signs that it is rapidly abandoning demands for substantial raises.

One educator commented on Facebook, "WTF MFT 59 - Minneapolis Federation of Teachers?! You want teachers to 'hold the line' for a 2% raise?! I feel so foolish for buying into union propaganda. Teachers will return to classrooms deflated and demoralized if this happens. I will vote NO if the bargaining team agrees to this shameful proposal."

Another wrote, "It would be really nice to know where we are at with the negotiations, since it seems the only group who actually negotiated was the union, giving up most of what we went into this strike fighting for. Most staff I've talked to are not supportive of agreeing to 3/3 (let alone anything less) and plan to vote no."

From the beginning, the teachers' unions have been working to keep the struggle in Minneapolis isolated. Despite an overwhelming strike vote by educators in St. Paul, the St. Paul Federation of Educators reached a deal with its district the day before a joint strike in both cities was set to begin. That agreement itself was an austerity contract, with raises of just 2 percent a year for teachers, far below the current inflation rate of 7.9 percent, entailing a major cut in real income.

The strike in Sacramento that began Wednesday, rather than being taken as an opportunity to expand and strengthen each struggle, is instead looked on by the national American Federation of Teachers (AFT) union as reason to swiftly impose a deal, however rotten, in Minneapolis, lest the two strikes galvanize broader opposition against the Biden administration, austerity and the pandemic.

Throughout the Minneapolis strike, the MFT and AFT, along with numerous pseudo-left organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America and Socialist Alternative, have sought to channel discontent behind dead-end appeals to Democratic politicians such as Minnesota Governor Tim Walz. The teachers' union apparatuses are themselves deeply integrated into the Democratic Party and have worked closely with the White House since Biden came into office. AFT President Randi Weingarten, a member of the Democratic National Committee, operates as a de facto member of Biden's cabinet, and has played a key role in suppressing teachers' opposition to the premature and dangerous reopening of schools to in-person instruction as the pandemic remains out of control. National Education Association President Becky Pringle is no less a tool of the White House.

Now, as the US and its NATO allies rapidly escalate a war drive against Russia, which threatens to spiral into a nuclear world war, the White House is relying ever-more heavily on the pro-corporate unions to contain and suppress strikes, and impose low wages while hundreds of billions are funneled into the military apparatus. A central factor in the reckless escalation of the war crisis itself is the enormous social, economic and political crisis in the US, with mass anger growing over surging prices and a never-ending pandemic, which the ruling class hopes to deflect towards

an “external” enemy.

Teachers who spoke to the WSWS on the picket lines Thursday, however, expressed a growing distrust toward the MFT’s strategy and the unions’ promotion of illusions in the Democrats.

A teacher at Washburn High School told the WSWS, “The two-party system is a myth; both parties don’t represent us. One big issue that shows this is the pandemic. Both parties pushed us into classrooms while the pandemic is still raging. The Democrats collaborate with the Republicans.”

WSWS reporters asked her about the MFT’s reactionary “educators of color” memorandum proposal, which would create preferences based on race in hiring and firing and undermine seniority protections. Racism, she said “is a class issue from the ground up. I want my kids to have diverse teachers, but I don’t think that it should be at the expense of other teachers’ jobs.” The Democrats, she said, “will do anything to divide us. This is an attempt to divide us by race.”

“I support the striking Sacramento teachers,” she concluded. “We should unite with the teachers in Sacramento; I think we would be stronger if we did so.”



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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