

Oppose the betrayal of the Minneapolis educators strike! Reject the MFT's sellout contract!

Marcus Day
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Are you an educator in Minneapolis Public Schools? We want to hear from you: Contact the WSWS and tell us what you think about the tentative agreement. Comments will be published anonymously.

This weekend, the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) is seeking to push through a tentative agreement reached with the school district early Friday morning in a bid to end the nearly three-week-long strike by 4,500 educators.

At press conferences Friday, both union and school officials claimed that a "return to work agreement" was still being negotiated. Late Friday night, the union posted its tentative agreement for educational support professionals (ESPs). As of this writing, it has not yet released the full contract proposal for teachers, which contains the majority of the language governing classroom conditions.

However, the details that have been released make clear that the contract conforms entirely to the demands of the school district and the Democratic Party for austerity.

According to a contract summary, teachers would reportedly receive cost-of-living raises of just 2 percent in the first year of the two-year contract and 3 percent in the second year. This is a massive and predictable climb-down of the MFT's earlier proposal of raises of 20 percent and 5 percent. They would also receive one-time, heavily taxed \$4,000 bonuses.

With inflation running at 7.9 percent and expected to increase, the wage increases would entail a substantial cut in real income. Teachers in Minneapolis Public Schools have not received raises greater than 2 percent a year in over 20 years.

Most low-paid educational support professionals (ESPs)—who currently have starting pay of as little as \$24,000, forcing many to take on second or third jobs—would see only modest and inadequate wage increases of around a \$1 an hour per year, resulting in below-inflation raises for some categories.

While the union had previously held up starting pay of \$35,000 for ESPs as a "red line" (despite this amount remaining a virtual poverty wage), MFT ESP chapter President Shaun Laden indicated on Friday only that "a lot" of ESPs would be making "very close to" that amount by the end of the contract.

Moreover, additional hours and school days used to bring up ESPs to higher annual pay were agreed to by the district only on a temporary basis, and not permanently included in the contract, raising the prospect of ESPs seeing pay cuts in subsequent school years.

Insufficient class size caps, according to early reports, will continue to result in over-crowded classrooms, and, if anything like St. Paul's contract, will be riddled with exceptions. Mental health resources for students would entail a minimum of just one social worker per school and one half-time nurse, a drop in the bucket given the crying social crisis facing the district's students, two-thirds of whom live in poverty.

Insidiously, the deal would include some form of the reactionary "educators of color" memorandum, a policy which would entail instituting racial preferences in hiring and firing. While touted by both district and union officials as a progressive measure advancing "social justice," the memorandum would in fact divide workers along racial lines. It is predicated on the false claim that there are not enough resources to defend the jobs of all teachers, let alone hire substantial numbers of new educators.

As miserable as the contract's terms are, they will be just a down payment in the intensified attacks on public education to follow. The Democratic Party-dominated school board had previously declared that the costs of its offer would require at least \$10 million in budget cuts.

On Friday, Superintendent Ed Graff stated, "We certainly will have to take a look at our budget. The contracts we have put forward are going to require us to take a look at our budgets going forward. So, we know we'll have to make those things happen in the next couple of weeks and months." In board meetings earlier this year, district officials also floated the possibility of 180 layoffs annually over the next five years.

Contrary to the ad nauseum claims that there is no money to both provide educators a good standard of living *and* expand public education, there are in reality more than enough resources to meet teachers' and students' needs. They are hoarded, however, by a tiny minority of ultra-rich billionaires, who in the US have seen their wealth grow by more than \$2 trillion during the pandemic, as well as gigantic corporations who have had their profits soar over the last two years.

Opposition from educators

The effort by the MFT to rush through such an austerity agreement this weekend must be opposed! As teachers have already noted, just a few hours or one day is not enough time to adequately study and understand a dense contract. Educators should demand at least a week to study the full terms of the contract, which will govern teachers working conditions and students learning conditions over the next year or more. If the MFT refuses, the contract should be rejected on principle.

In a well-worn tactic aimed at demobilizing this opposition, Minneapolis school administrators and the corporate media are attempting to present the shutdown of the strike as an accomplished fact, if not a foregone conclusion. The district sent robocalls and mass texts to parents Friday, with one falsely stating, “MPS welcomes back students and staff to schools on Monday, March 28. A tentative agreement was reached with MFT. The strike has ended.”

However, as details of the tentative agreement began to emerge Friday, they sparked growing anger among educators.

“2% this year for teachers and 3% next year for teachers is not enough!” one Minneapolis teacher wrote on Facebook. “Most ESPs Only getting \$1 raise? This has to be a joke. A .5 nurse per building? Really? Our kids deserve more!”

“After reading this post it feels like MFT leadership has already made up their mind about what’s ‘good’ for the collective,” another wrote in a popular comment. “Union leadership is trying to rush a ‘yes’ vote instead of giving members time and space to read the TA and think critically about what we are agreeing to.”

In a scathing post, a third wrote that the deal is “beyond insulting. I’m furious. And the union’s email to us about this great TA with so much of what we asked for? Even more insulting and extremely misleading. I hope people actually read the contract before voting. How great they included class size caps … oh wait, last I checked they agreed on something like 44 kids in a middle school class. My worst nightmare. Those great mental health supports they included? Last I checked they had one social worker to 600 kids. Yes, 600.”

“I’ll be voting NO,” the writer concluded. “I didn’t stand outside in the freezing cold to get none of the above and only a 2% raise. Nope.”

For rank-and-file committees!

For educators to win their demands for living wages for all school workers and a massive infusion of resources to adequately staff classrooms, it is urgent that they move to form new organizations, rank-and-file committees independent of both the unions and the big business political parties.

The strategy of “pressuring” the Democratic Party pursued by the MFT and its parent unions, the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association, has yet again

demonstrated its bankruptcy. While Democratic Minnesota Governor Tim Walz (endorsed by the Education Minnesota state teacher union) has postured as supporting \$2.5 billion in additional education funding—a paltry amount given the state’s nearly \$10 billion surplus—he knows full well that this figure will be drastically winnowed down in horse-trading with the Republican-controlled State Senate.

The Democratic Party, just as much as the Republicans, is a party of austerity, Wall Street and war, and has long overseen attacks on public education in the Twin Cities and nationwide. Since the emergence of COVID-19, both parties have prioritized corporate profits over human lives. Now, the Biden administration and the political establishment are escalating a military confrontation against Russia with extreme recklessness, threatening to initiate processes which will spiral into nuclear war.

Striking teachers and school workers are engaged in a political struggle against the Democratic Party. But the unions, deeply integrated into the Democrats and the capitalist state, are doing everything in their power to prevent the strike in Minneapolis from coalescing into a direct conflict with the Biden administration and the capitalist system.

More than two years into a pandemic that has killed over one million people in the US—including countless school workers and even children—educators, their students, and the schools have all reached a breaking point.

A line must be drawn! A rejection of the ruling class’ attempts to impose further attacks on public education would galvanize opposition among educators and other workers throughout the United States and beyond.

Already, nearly 5,000 teachers and paraprofessionals are on strike in Sacramento, California, facing similar problems of low pay and catastrophic levels of understaffing, a product of the Democratic and Republican Parties criminal “herd immunity” policies during the pandemic. Recent reports in *USA Today* and the *Guardian* have spoken of a growing wave of militancy and strikes among teachers, who are once again in the forefront of efforts by workers to resist low wages and intolerable working conditions.

The mobilization and organization of the collective strength of the working class requires the formation of new organizations of working-class struggle. The WSWS urges educators in Minneapolis and elsewhere to contact us to discuss organizing a rank-and-file committee at your school.

Fill out the form below to get in touch with us today:



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