

# Over widespread opposition, MFT pushes through austerity contract, ending Minneapolis educators strike

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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 agreement. Comments will be published anonymously.*

On Sunday evening, officials for Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) and the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) announced that their tentative agreements for teachers, education assistants and other school staff have been ratified. In a statement announcing the ratification, MPS wrote that educators would return to classrooms for a “transition day” on Monday, with classes set to resume Tuesday.

According to an email from the MFT shared by a teacher with the WSWs, the contract proposals for the teachers and educational support professional (ESP) chapters passed by 75.7 percent and 79.9 percent, respectively.

However, MFT’s reported figures indicate that a substantial number of educators either abstained or were unable to vote. The union reported that 2,699 of its teacher members and 784 ESP members voted, a total of 3,483. With roughly 5,000 members, this would indicate an abstention rate of approximately 30 percent. In calls that were ignored by the MFT, teachers and ESPs had demanded that voting be extended until Monday or for online voting to be made available, since many either were out of town or working their second (or third) jobs over the weekend.

As details of the tentative agreements began to emerge Friday morning, they provoked widespread opposition among educators, which continued to build over the weekend. Speaking to the WSWs before the vote results were announced, a special education teacher in Minneapolis said, “Anecdotally speaking most people I know (social workers, ESPs, teachers) are voting ‘no.’ We sacrificed a lot, and we are not done fighting. The union is pressuring its members to vote ‘yes.’ My understanding is that they are under a lot of pressure by elected leaders to concede.

“There has been a disturbing campaign to shame and blame dissenting opinions,” she continued. “Voting on the tentative agreement and return to work process is very problematic for many members. The union provided limited locations and hours for members to vote over the weekend. Many members are out of town or working this weekend. The union rejected online voting and did not offer alternative voting options if members were unable to vote this weekend.”

The MFT deliberately tried to stampede educators into accepting the deal, she said. “The union delayed giving members the full tentative agreement. Many members did not have the time and space to properly evaluate before voting.”

After the results were reported, she raised questions about their accuracy given the degree of opposition among her colleagues, saying, “Those numbers seem off. 650 no votes seems low.”

Striking educators in Minneapolis had found themselves pitted in a political struggle against the Democratic Party, which demanded a new round of austerity. They once again claimed that there is no money to provide educators a decent standard of living and fully fund public education, despite a \$10 billion state budget surplus, record corporate profits and a massive run-up in the wealth of US billionaires, to the tune of more than \$2 trillion.

In all essentials, the MFT acquiesced to the demands for austerity. Teachers will receive raises of just 2 percent and 3 percent, along with a one-time \$4,000 bonus, far below the current inflation rate of 7.9 percent. Most ESPs, meanwhile, will receive raises of around \$1 an hour each year. While the MFT had previously trumpeted a “red line” of a \$35,000 starting salary for all ESPs—itsself a virtually unlivable wage—even this was abandoned. ESP chapter President Shaun Laden said merely “a lot” of ESPs will make “very close” to that amount by the end of the contract.

Class size caps will almost certainly remain a dead letter, with numerous exceptions to the limits incorporated in the contract. Mental health supports will remain inadequate and overwhelmed, with school social workers and nurses burdened with caseloads numbering in the hundreds.

And what was touted by both the district and the MFT as a major point of agreement—so-called “protections for educators of color”—is in fact a reactionary measure. It will sow racial divisions and undermine education workers’ unity, pitting teachers of different races in a fratricidal struggle over jobs.

The attacks on educators contained in the contracts are themselves only a down payment on a series of attacks being prepared by school administrators and the Democratic Party establishment in the Twin Cities.

Minneapolis has indicated that layoffs are in the offing, with officials pointing to declining enrollment that is the product of years of underfunding and the expansion of for-profit charter schools. The Minneapolis school board has stated that cuts of \$10 million will be required to supposedly offset the cost of the contracts.

**“If this is what winning looks like to MFT, I’d hate to see their version of losing”**

Teachers and ESPs who spoke with WSWs reporters outside the voting site over the weekend voiced their opposition to the deal. An ESP explained how many her of coworkers were under financial duress and felt they had no choice but vote “yes” on the deal, given the almost total lack of strike pay from MFT.

“I don’t feel like this contract shows that we are getting the respect as professionals in the schools yet. The majority of ESPs feel like the school district is trying to give us what we want. But I don’t feel that we won. Our backs are against the wall, and the school district knows that.

“Many of our people are dependent on health insurance. We’re short on pay. In our last pay period, we will get nothing. The pay period before that we only got half our pay. Our families need attention. For many people, they didn’t feel that they had a choice but to end the strike.”

A teacher pointed out how the contracts, which gave relatively higher (although still completely inadequate) percentage raises to ESPs, were aimed at sowing divisions among education workers. “As far as the teachers’ contract, it seems pretty clear they are trying to divide ESPs from the teachers. They gave the ESPs a somewhat reasonable raise towards a living wage.

“But there’s a reality here. I would say there are ESPs that find themselves in a financial situation where they can’t stay out on strike any longer.

“It’s a terrible situation. The ability to divide workers has a lot to do with how the system works, and how the unions work.

“I’m not a leader, but with all the BS that is going on with politics and in the union leadership I feel like I’m going to have to be more active. The Democratic Party and the union leadership are both part of the power structure. It needs to be dismantled.”

Anger among educators and disgust with the MFT was also expressed on Facebook. Summing up the feelings of many, one wrote in a popular comment, “If this is what winning looks like to MFT, I’d hate to see their version of losing.”

### **Build rank-and-file committees to carry the struggle forward!**

The strike in Minneapolis, having reached its 20th day Sunday, was one of the longest strikes by educators in a major US city in recent memory. The courageous walkout points to a renewed wave of militancy and class struggle beginning to emerge, with 5,000 teachers and paraprofessionals initiating a strike in Sacramento, California last Wednesday, and major contract battles looming in Los Angeles and New York City later this year.

The MFT and the national American Federation of Teachers (AFT) accelerated their efforts to secure an agreement just as 5,000 Sacramento teachers walked out. Instead of linking up these strikes and expanding them, the unions worked to isolate them. This followed the unions’ blocking a strike by several thousand educators in St. Paul, Minnesota, which was set to begin at the same time as the Minneapolis walkout.

The betrayal of the Minneapolis strike is in line with the conduct of the AFT, the National Education Association (NEA) and their affiliates over several decades. Under both Democratic and Republican administrations, public education has been all but gutted. Following the 2008 financial crash, hundreds of thousands of teachers

were laid off under Obama, who accelerated the reactionary school privatization campaigns of his predecessor under the “Race to the Top” program.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the treachery of the unions has reached a qualitative and criminal new level. The AFT and NEA have played the critical role in ensuring that schools were prematurely and unsafely reopened to in-person learning. This has resulted in countless needless deaths and debilitating illness among both teachers and students. Struggles by educators to force a return to remote learning until the pandemic is contained, such as in Chicago earlier this year, have also been sabotaged by the unions.

The teachers unions are incapable of fighting to defend teachers or expand public education because they are completely integrated into and beholden to the Democratic Party, one of the two main parties of Wall Street and war. As the Democrats and the political establishment more broadly rapidly escalate the danger of war with Russia, ever-greater demands for “sacrifice” will be imposed on workers, including the further suppression of wages and destruction of workplace rights.

Teachers, ESPs and other school workers should draw the necessary conclusions from the experience of the Minneapolis strike. New independent organizations, rank-and-file committees at every school, are needed for teachers to be able to coordinate and expand their struggles and share information outside “official” channels. Such committees will conduct a fight for what educators and students actually need, not what the Democratic Party and the ruling class more broadly claim is “affordable.”

These new organizations must be fused with a socialist perspective. The vast majority of the population, the working class, must take political power out of the hands of the unfathomably rich financial aristocracy, which has nothing to offer but inequality and poverty, a never-ending pandemic, and the rapidly growing danger of nuclear war. The wealth of this parasitic class must be expropriated and redirected towards pressing social need, including the vast expansion of public education and urgent measures to bring a halt to COVID-19.

*To discuss setting up a rank-and-file committee at your school, fill out the form below to get in touch with us today:*



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