

3 weeks after MFT sellout of educators strike

## Anger builds among Minneapolis educators, students over proposed budget cuts and rollback of COVID-19 safety measures

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*Are you an educator or student in the Minneapolis Public Schools? We want to hear from you. Contact the WSWS and tell us what you think about the proposed cuts and abandonment of COVID-19 safety measures. Comments will be published anonymously.*

A little less than a month after the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) union shut down a 20-day strike by 5,000 Minneapolis educators, anger is simmering among teachers, students and their families over the disastrous and worsening conditions in the schools.

On Tuesday, students at a number of high schools across the city walked out in protest over the school board's lengthening of the school day following the strike, as well as the poverty conditions teachers and students are experiencing in Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS).

A student involved in organizing the protests, Zaraia Fabunmi, told BridgemakersMN, "Seeing the extra effort that [my teachers] have put in to make me feel that they care about me as a student ... I want to be able to give back. I want my teachers to have health care; I want them to have livable wages. ... I want them to have all of the things they need."

The latest signs of opposition among students take place at the same time as the city's Democratic Party establishment is undertaking further attacks on public education and educators' jobs and working conditions.

On Wednesday, Minneapolis Public Schools officials floated devastating cuts to the school system's budget, as high as \$27.1 million for the 2022-2023 school year. In addition to the cuts being considered for 2022-2023, the school board is counting on saving \$24 million by not filling open positions this year, exacerbating the staffing crisis in the schools.

The school board is seeking to shift blame for the cuts onto teachers and school support staff, claiming that the austerity contract negotiated with the MFT last month makes the budget reductions necessary. "To meet these contractual agreements and their associated costs, we have to find the money somewhere," said Ibrahima Diop, MPS' senior financial officer. It is not clear how many layoffs the cuts may entail, but the district had

previously said 180 positions a year may be slashed.

The Democratic Party-dominated school board's effort to shift responsibility for the cuts onto educators is a cynical fraud, aimed at pitting parents and students against teachers and school staff, who fought with immense self-sacrifice throughout the strike for the expansion of resources for public schools.

Significantly, Diop added that the cuts would be made "under a lens of equity," that is, enacted along racial lines. Such an undertaking, dividing educators by race and ethnicity, would be in line with the reactionary "Educators of Color" memorandum, which was enthusiastically pursued by both Democratic Party school officials and the MFT in the course of contract negotiations.

As the WSWS has previously explained, the racial preferences agreement—grotesquely presented as a "progressive" measure by the MFT—is in fact predicated on the lying assumption that there are not enough resources to fully fund public education and undermines the struggle to unify educators and workers of all races on the basis of their common class interests.

### **MPS announces rollback of COVID-19 safety measures**

The day after floating major budget cuts, Minneapolis school officials also announced that virtually all of the district's minimal COVID-19 mitigation efforts would be dropped.

Masks will no longer be required in schools and on buses as of Monday; universal contact tracing will no longer be conducted; parents will not be contacted when someone in their child's classroom tests positive for COVID-19; and those who have been exposed to COVID-19 and are vaccinated will not be required to quarantine. Earlier in the week, the school board in neighboring St. Paul also voted to drop mask requirements.

Preposterously, MPS Superintendent Ed Graff wrote in a statement, "MPS remains committed to maximizing in-person learning, meeting the academic and mental health needs of our students, and providing a safe learning environment for all." Graff

announced days after the strike ended that he would be stepping down as superintendent when his contract expires in June, having faced growing demands for his resignation by teachers, students and parents for his role in overseeing six years of attacks on public education.

The cessation of mitigation efforts has no basis in science or the actual state of the pandemic, which continues to wreak havoc on the health of the population. In Hennepin County, where Minneapolis is located, the daily reported case average has risen 68 percent over the previous two weeks.

The district's move to end COVID-19 safety measures is of a piece with the mass infection strategy pursued by the Biden administration and the political establishment more broadly, carried out under guise of "living with the virus." The abandonment of essentially any mitigation efforts in Minneapolis schools will mean the needless further spread of the virus and untold numbers suffering from debilitating Long COVID syndrome or even dying among school workers, students and their families.

News of the budget reductions and abandonment of COVID-19 safety measures have provoked an outcry among educators and parents alike. "This is retaliation and is BS, they have the money but they just don't wanna cough it up," one teacher wrote about the proposed cuts on Facebook.

A parent of an MPS student tweeted, "I just want to say I have been through a round of school closures and district contraction before in this district (as an employee) and I don't really think I am really prepared to go through that again (as a parent this time). This is absolutely where we're headed and it sucks." She added, "Not to mention how lifting the mask mandate makes me super unsure if continuing to send my kids to school is actually going to kill me."

### **MFT's sellout of the strike**

The end of COVID-19 safety measures and the proposed cuts, nearly three times as high as the \$10 million earlier threatened by the board, further demolish the MFT's claims to have secured an "historic victory."

In reality, the union rammed through an agreement which failed to meet any of the needs of educators. The deal contained pay increases of just 2-3 percent annually for teachers, far below the inflation rate of 8.5 percent, entailing a major cut in real income. Educational support professionals will remain mired in poverty, receiving \$1 per hour annual raises, with some making below the MFT's bogus "living wage" of \$35,000.

Class size caps and mental health support, meanwhile, will be largely a dead letter in the contract, with schools continuing to suffer extreme understaffing and lack of resources.

In order to push through this blatantly regressive agreement over widespread opposition, the union trampled on the democratic rights of its members. It rushed through a vote less than 48 hours after releasing the contract terms, refusing demands by teachers to

allow online balloting or to extend the length of time to vote. The MFT's frantic efforts to shut down the strike came just a few days after roughly 5,000 educators in Sacramento, California, had also walked out over similar issues of understaffing, low pay and lack of COVID-19 safety measures.

The MFT and its counterparts in the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association unions, far from seeking to link up and expand the strikes in Minneapolis and Sacramento, worked to isolate and shut them down as soon as possible. The teacher unions feared that the struggles would spark a much broader movement in the working class and a direct confrontation with capitalism and the Democratic Party, in which the unions are deeply integrated.

The Democrats have long spearheaded school privatization and the expansion of for-profit charter schools, while overseeing soaring inequality and murderous police violence. Minneapolis school board Chair Kim Ellison repeatedly issued imperious threats against teachers during the strike, claiming there was no money to meet teachers' demands, despite massive profits during the pandemic by Minnesota-based corporations, such as Target and UnitedHealthcare.

Meanwhile, Kim Ellison's former husband, Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison, recently appeared alongside Hennepin County Attorney Michael Freeman to announce that no charges would be filed against the officer who killed Amir Locke immediately after breaking into an apartment during a no-knock raid. Ellison has been hailed by the so-called "progressive" wing of the Democratic Party, receiving the endorsement of Senator Bernie Sanders in Ellison's run for Attorney General in 2018.

A struggle must be waged against the school budget cuts and the ruling class' "herd immunity" policies of unrestrained COVID-19 infection. However, the MFT, wedded to the Democratic Party, has demonstrated that it is incapable of carrying out such a fight. New organizations, rank-and-file committees at every school, workplace and neighborhood must be built independently of the unions and the political establishment.

The student walkouts this week are part of the rapidly escalating working class opposition throughout the US and internationally, which is building up over the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ruling class' prioritization of profits over human life, escalating attacks on democratic rights and rapidly eroding living standards. The Democratic and Republican parties' accelerating assault on workers is being carried out as hundreds of billions are being squandered on the dramatic build-up of the US war machine.

In order for the coming struggles to succeed, educators, students and workers must be armed with a socialist perspective, based on the fight to build a mass movement in the working class for its interests and against inequality and war.



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