

Teachers in Brookline, Massachusetts, end one-day strike after union agrees to below-inflation, six-year contract

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The Brookline Educators Union (BEU) reached a contract agreement with the Brookline School Committee (BSC) after signing a tentative agreement Tuesday at 4:00 a.m. The agreement averted what would have been the second day of a strike that began on Monday, May 16. The walkout closed the nine public schools in the Boston suburb that educate over 7,000 students and employ approximately 1,238 educators, including teachers, nurses, administrators, paraprofessionals and others.

The strike is the latest expression of struggles taken up by teachers and workers across the globe. This has included a one-day strike by 26,000 kindergarten teachers in Germany, tens of thousands of teachers in Australia striking against intolerable conditions and pay cuts. In Oakland, California, 2,000 teachers struck against school closures and layoffs, while 5,000 health care workers and nurses in neighboring San Francisco and 500 Chevron oil refinery workers just a short drive away in Richmond, California, also went on strike.

The BEU has kept educators on the job for nearly three years without a contract. Like many teachers, including those in the Boston Public Schools system who have been working without a contract for eight months, Brookline educators are demanding, among other issues, “reasonable compensation as well as working conditions that meet the realities of a modern, comprehensive education,” according to the union. A key component of working conditions stressed by teachers was the amount of time they have to prepare for their work with students, as well as the time they have to collaborate with colleagues.

At a Zoom meeting to discuss the strike on Monday night, teachers speaking out against current working conditions dominated the discussion. One educator said, “For teachers, working conditions are the one thing that makes the job,” adding that “those things like prep periods, planning time, class size” and “working conditions” in general played the largest role in “derailing” teachers from creating the optimal

learning environment for students.

“Our teaching conditions are students’ learning conditions,” another teacher said. “My 6th grade and 8th grade colleagues don’t have their own room, they share massive caves with other people.” The teacher added, “We also have the fact that our rooms frequently are in the high 80s, 90s for September, October, May and June. That’s not okay.” She also said there are 93 7th graders at her school for whom she is the sole English teacher, which drastically affects the quality of education of her students.

Despite these issues raised passionately by teachers in the public meeting, early the next morning the BEU announced classes would resume and that the BEU and BSC had “reached an agreement on contracts covering 2020 to 2026.” Teachers were given no time to review the agreement, and students and parents were given little warning that school would be continuing as they were forced back into classes, unprepared for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test they would have to take Tuesday.

One parent posted on Facebook, “Tenth graders actually need to pass the MCAS in order to graduate. My tenth grader went to sleep last night not knowing whether they had school today and now has to be at BHS [Brookline High School] at 8 am to take the MCAS. How was this decision made?”

The School Committee said the agreement includes a 6 percent increase in all wages and stipends for the first three years of the contract, starting retroactively in 2020, followed by a total 8 percent increase over the period of September 2023 through August 2026, with an additional 1 percent in August 2026.

According to the agreement, teachers in grades K-5 will continue to have “40 prep minutes per day under the previous contract guarantees.” Teachers in grades 6-8 will similarly “receive at least 40 prep minutes per full school day,” and teachers in grades 9-12 “will have one unassigned

block per full school day.” Starting in 2025 “most” specialized teachers—art, world languages and physical education—will have “one unassigned period per day.”

The tentative agreement makes no mention of SARS-CoV-2, despite a growing wave of cases in Massachusetts, with Tuesday recording 3,425 new confirmed cases and a positivity rate of 9.12 percent. It was recently revealed that the new and even more transmissible BA.2.12.1 variant has become the dominant variant in the state.

Cases currently are becoming so prevalent in schools that despite the ending of most if not all mitigation measures, one Brookline principal wrote to parents, “I am asking students and staff in grades 7 and 8 to wear masks indoors for the remainder of the week. The number of positive cases has significantly increased this week in these two grades. I understand this is not easy, but we need to get through this wave of cases with healthy students and staff.”

Schools have and continue to be main vectors of transmission for the virus, with teachers and students forced into schools and subjugated to mass infection. According to data from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), in the past two weeks alone 6,679, or 4.77 percent, of all teachers in Massachusetts and 21,459, or 2.33 percent, of all students tested positive for COVID-19. These figures are in fact a significant undercount.

The removal of all language or mention of COVID-19 from the current contract negotiation and the deteriorating working conditions teachers face are part of a universal process affecting teachers and workers everywhere. The unions have functioned in each struggle waged by teachers and other workers to both suppress and isolate strikes from spreading out of control and thereby stopping the linking up of workers from different industries as well as geographic locations into a common struggle.

The unions have consistently acted as enforcers for getting teachers and students back into schools under the herd immunity policies of the Biden administration and campaigned for teachers to vote for the Democratic Party, which has systematically extracted funds from schools and social infrastructure for decades and funneled trillions of dollars into military spending for three decades of never-ending war.

The Brookline Schools Committee said in a statement on the agreement, “The terms acknowledge the needs of students and educators, as well as the financial reality of the town.” In reality, the needs of students and educators everywhere are diametrically opposed to the financial interests of whichever town or city they live in, as well as the federal government as a whole.

The claim that there is no money is a lie. Brookline—home to two billionaires with a combined net worth of over \$11.7

billion and with a substantial number of wealthy residents—has the resources to more than cover the cost of decent public education in the city. But the attack on public schools is not a local issue for the residents of Brookline. Public education is under relentless attack across the country and internationally. Only through a mass movement of the working class, as an independent political force fighting for its class interests, can education be defended.

The BEA supports the Democratic Party, which protects the interests of the financial markets and the position of the US within the global economy and has provided economic bailouts for the large banks and corporations and endless military funding. It is within this context that the decades of relentless attacks on public schools must be seen, and it is with this understanding that teachers and workers must base their struggles.

Brookline teachers voted “overwhelmingly” in favor of strike action Thursday night, showing their determination to fight under conditions of ever worsening pay and working conditions. Far from guaranteeing the interests of educators, the agreement in fact represents a substantial pay cut and merely maintains agreements for preparation time that were in the previous contract.

Brookline teachers must prepare for the next stage in the struggle as teachers in nearby Boston, who are still working without a contract, are now facing the prospect of the Boston Public Schools system being taken into receivership, giving direct control to the state to cut costs and attack teachers’ conditions and students’ education.

An essential step in this fight will be the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to organize educators throughout the state.



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