

Massachusetts: Teachers strike in Haverhill and Malden

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Public schools in the Massachusetts towns of Haverhill and Malden are scheduled to remain closed today after teachers walked out Monday over failed contract negotiations. This followed overwhelming votes in both districts on Friday to authorize strike action.

In Malden, talks between the school district and Malden Education Association (MEA), which is affiliated with the National Education Association (NEA), broke down Sunday evening when the School Committee halted negotiations, declaring an impasse after nine hours of talks.

MEA President Deb Gesauldo said negotiations broke down over the issue of pay for paraprofessionals, sometimes known as teacher's aides or teacher assistants. In a statement released by the Malden School Committee Negotiations Subcommittee, "Education Support Professionals" are to receive wage increases of 2.4 percent in year one and 2.5 percent in years two and three of the contract. These workers receive a starting salary of only \$20,761.53 to \$29,788.52, depending on experience, which amounts to a poverty wage.

Teachers do not fare much better in the proposal, with a 4 percent raise in year one, 3 percent in year two and 2.5 percent in year three. With inflation currently running at 8.5 percent, this amounts to a pay cut for educators.

Nearly 700 educators walked picket lines Monday at seven school locations around the city, including about 150 workers at Malden High School. Hundreds of educators and their supporters later rallied at Malden City Hall.

SEP supporters distributed copies of the latest statement of the Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, The crisis in education and the case

for rank-and-file committees, and had discussions with teachers and parents at the rally.

A special education teacher said he was opposed to the contract. "I heard that the school committee was proposing under 8 percent. And if anything, you know, I believe it should be at least at 8 or above, considering inflation right now is 8.2 percent," he said. "We know that energy prices are going to increase in the upcoming months due to the shortage of natural gas and what's going on in Ukraine. And when prices go up, they're not going to come back down.

"So, anything less than 8 is something that I believe we should not settle for. But one proposal from the school committee I heard was 4 percent one year, 3 percent the second, and the next 2 percent."

The worker said he worked in Malden as a special education teacher in kindergarten last year, describing the horrific conditions.

"You know, I was supposed to have another paraprofessional in my classroom that I did not have. These are students with severe, severe disabilities," he said.

"I didn't even have a bathroom in my class. So, if you have to take your kid to the bathroom, then you've got all six kids, what do you do? I was always juggling. And when that happens, you worry about the safety of the kids.

"These kids deserve to be in the general system. They deserve all the opportunities that other kids have."

Asked what he thought about the constant refrain that there is no money he replied, "My argument is they have money to bail out airlines, to bail out banks, to give money to everybody else, not teachers."

The WSWs spoke to Kevin Graham, a local parent who had turned out with his entire family to support the teachers. He expressed his ongoing concerns over

COVID-19 in the schools.

“The CDC said we needed at least \$100 million to safely open the schools during the pandemic. What was in the budget for schools? \$20 billion. That’s a huge deficit. I have three small children in the Malden district. Two of their teachers had to be out for a week. I have a kindergartener, first grader, second grader. This is still not safe.

“Have you seen the school budget for Malden?” Kevin asked. “It’s top heavy with all the administrators. Even the school committee’s getting 10 grand each for 45 minutes once a month.”

Pointing to the educators assembled at the rally, Kevin said, “These people, boots on the ground, are not asking for a huge whopping pay raise. They’re not asking to be Tom Brady. They’re asking for a living wage. They say it’s an illegal strike, but last time I checked, I remember the Constitution says life liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Right? What’s illegal about pursuing a better wage?

“Everything we have good in America started with a teacher, right? Anybody can think of a teacher that sparked their brain at this age, by someone who walked out of their house to educate a kid in public education.”

Section 9A of the Massachusetts Public Employee Collective Bargaining Law prohibits public employees and employee organizations from striking or inducing, encouraging or condoning a work stoppage by public employees.

The Haverhill School Committee has filed a complaint with the Massachusetts Labor Relations Board and issued a request for an injunction against the Haverhill Education Association (HEA) strike in Essex County Superior Court. According to the court order, “HEA and MTA, their officers, the employees they represent ... shall immediately cease and desist from engaging in a strike or work stoppage, slowdown or other withholding of services to Haverhill Public Schools.”

The order states further: “The HEA and its officers ... shall take any necessary steps immediately to notify the employees whom HEA represents of their obligation to fully perform the duties of their employment, including the obligation to refrain from any form of strike or work stoppage.”

Haverhill workers are continuing their struggle for a new contract, but the HEA and MTA will seek to end

this as soon as possible. In May this year, teachers in Brookline went on strike, closing all nine of the district’s schools. The strike was shut down in the dead of night with no vote by the membership or even consultation being reported. The *Boston Globe* reports that the union agreed to pay \$50,000 in damages for carrying out a one-day strike.

In Boston, the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) last month organized an in-person-only meeting to push through a vote on a rotten agreement they had reached with the city in August. The BTU described the meeting of a “packed house,” writing in an email, “We had over 800 members in attendance throughout the evening, and the voting members passed all four bargaining units overwhelmingly.” What the email does not say is that the vote was 302 in favor and 52 against. So less than 400 people voted out of a membership of 7,700 active and 3,317 retired workers to ratify the deal.

The BTU contract includes a pay raise of only 3 percent in years one and three and 3.5 percent in year two—well below the current rate of inflation of over 8 percent. The vote was delayed until after the new school year began.

The Northeast Educators Rank and File Safety Committees was founded to defend workplace safety, living standards of educators and parents and public education. It is part of a network of rank-and-file committees throughout the US and internationally, organized in the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). We urge all educators in Massachusetts and throughout the Northeast to study the statements of the committee and take the decision to get involved.



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