

Teachers in Haverhill, Massachusetts, defy injunction and continue strike for fourth day

Mike Ingram
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Haverhill educators remained on strike Thursday despite a court ruling declaring the strike illegal under Massachusetts law. The strike began Monday and coincided with teachers' actions in Malden, another Massachusetts city.

The Malden strike was ended after just one day, and teachers returned to work Tuesday after a tentative agreement was reached between Malden Public Schools and the Malden Education Association (MEA).

Deb Gesualdo, president of the MEA, said 97 percent of the union's more than 700 members voted to approve the contract, which she claimed includes raises for teachers and administrators and an entirely new pay scale for paraprofessionals that will "move them closer to a living wage." However, no details have been released as "a final draft of the contract is currently being prepared," she told the *Boston Globe*, and needs to be reviewed by the full school committee.

While educators remained on the picket lines in Haverhill Thursday, the union had already announced that the contract was essentially a done deal, and all that was left were some tweaks to the language for the return to work.

Haverhill Educators Association Vice President Barry Davis claimed teachers were out celebrating on the picket line. "It's a large increase," Davis said of the financial agreement. "It starts to fix the \$10,000 gap. It doesn't close it, but it starts to improve the conditions in Haverhill."

The Haverhill teachers have been on strike since Monday to push for significant changes to their contract. Though talks continued for nearly eight hours Wednesday, negotiators were not able to get educators back to work Thursday.

The school committee said an agreement was reached Wednesday night on a wage deal costing \$25 million

but gave no indication of what this means for teachers' pay. The worker spoken to by the WSWs said all they had heard was that it was 4 percent for year one of the contract and 3 percent for years two and three.

One educator stated that even when average inflation was at 3 percent, "That puts us at break even. Inflation of 8 percent cuts into your purchasing power." He pointed out that "the superintendent got \$25,000 and the lawyers got \$70,000 plus \$235 an hour, but they can't give money to their educators."

A freshman teacher said there were two main issues: the language of the contract and the money in the contract. "The teachers' conditions, the safety concerns that we have, and the fact that we've been under the state average for too long now."

Asked what he thought should be in a new contract, the teacher said, "Oh, something close to the average, something much closer than where we're at right now. I'm not greedy, but what they're having us do for the amount of money that they're giving us is not on."

Another teacher added, "If Haverhill pays below the average, nobody's going to want to teach here. We're already a math teacher down, and we have two teachers teaching on waivers. So, we have extra kids in our classes, which makes it harder to teach. If you don't pay us, if it seems like we're greedy, you can say that all you want, but if nobody wants to teach here, then we all struggle, right?"

When this reporter pointed out that the average pay for educators in Massachusetts is inadequate, the teacher responded, "The average isn't adequate, but we are 10 G's below that. Inflation has gone up."

There are currently 76 open positions listed on the Haverhill School District website.

In 2019-20, Haverhill teachers were paid an average of \$74,287. In the district with the lowest pay,

Petersham, teachers made an average of \$39,246. At the opposite end, teachers in Concord-Carlisle made on average \$110,665.

Still holding up a settlement Thursday was language related to reporting systems. The HEA is looking for a “working group” to facilitate forms and communication channels to notify teachers when there is an incident that pertains to their work.

Peter, an art teacher, told the WWS, “We are on strike to get a contract we deserve. There have been a variety of sticking points throughout the bargaining process. But I think that the safety issue is one that the union members care a lot about. It’s different at each school, and it’s different for different teachers. It depends a lot on what the teacher does.

“If you’re an art teacher like me, you might not have a regular daily problem with safety issues. But if you’re a guidance counselor in one of the elementary and middle schools, then you may have. You might be seeing student-on-student and student-and-staff physical altercations, then you want to make sure that there’s a good reporting system, and that there’s accountability and safety for everybody involved.

“So it’s not just violence in the classroom. I mean, it’s more nuanced than that. Essentially, we’re talking about students who need physical safety, and they need emotional support so that they can make the right choices and keep everybody in the room safe.”

Asked if the situation had gotten worse since COVID-19, Peter said he could not answer that as he is only in his second year of teaching.

High school teacher Bethany said, “I can answer that.” She said things had definitely gotten worse since the pandemic.

“So, yes, trauma, trauma among students has increased exponentially from the pandemic, even just from being home and what they deal with at home. This is a very diverse community with a wide range of socio-economic concerns and issues.

“We have a lot of poverty and food insecurity, which causes trauma. We have had kids at home who may have been taking care of themselves because their parents had to work. There are kids who experienced violence in the home; there are kids whose social skills didn’t allow them to be adjusted at home; and now all of a sudden they come right back into school.

“So, the trauma rates in our students increased

drastically. And people have trauma responses that can come out in different ways. One of those ways could be physical. So, we need to have enough support in place to help these students to reintegrate back in school and meet their needs.”

While neither the wages settlement in Haverhill nor the tentative agreement in Malden has been published, it is likely neither will meet the demands of teachers, who have struck for a decent contract.

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.” The statement addresses the urgent need for educators to organize independently of the union apparatus to secure decent living standards for educators and safe education for students and teachers.

The Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee 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 make the decision to get involved.



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