

Worcester teachers must draw lessons from union sellouts across Massachusetts

Andrew Timon
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On May 11, the Worcester School Committee, and the Educational Association of Worcester (EAW) reached a tentative agreement on a contract for teachers in this Massachusetts city through August 31, 2026.

While no plans for a strike had been previously announced, teachers had held numerous rallies and demonstrations and rejected multiple inadequate contract proposals. A movement of rank-and-file teachers appeared to be developing into an inevitable strike, with no contract proposals coming close to meeting the demands of teachers.

A thousand Worcester teachers held a rally at the end of April outside City Hall. Teachers held a district-wide standout on April 13, following four separate standouts in different sections of the city in January.

Standing with other educators at one of the rallies, Yahaira Rodriguez, para-educator at Sullivan Middle School told telegraph.com that if a vote to strike took place “they would vote in favor and be ready to go.”

Worcester teachers also held a vote of no-confidence in the School Committee, City Council, Superintendent, and City Manager for their collective failure to negotiate fair contracts our educators and students and community deserve, with 97 percent voting in favor. At the same time, the Worcester School Committee filed a petition for a mediator after the EAW had rejected its latest contract.

No details of the tentative contract have been released, and the EAW gave no information on the deal in response to a call by this reporter. Teachers, however, should be under no illusion that the contract has won substantial gains through pressuring the city. The experience of fellow teachers and other school workers in Massachusetts who have worked without a contract for months—or years—in the recent period should be brought to bear on the contract struggle in Worcester.

Over the past two years, teachers in Malden, Haverhill, Woburn and Brookline have gone on strike, with many

other districts holding protests and rallies like in Worcester. In each instance the union leadership called an end to the strike as soon as possible, agreed to pay huge fines to districts for striking, while claiming their strikes had won decent contracts.

Time and time again, union officials declared they had won substantial concessions. The *Boston Globe* chimed that all four districts had “won favorable contracts.” In reality, in each case the union signed a sellout contract which not only failed to come close to meeting the demands of rank-and-file teachers but amounted to actual cuts in real wages.

In Woburn, WTA officials and the School Committee reached a tentative agreement on the evening of Sunday, February 5. The union announced that teachers would vote on the deal late that same Sunday evening, giving them no time to seriously study or discuss the details of the agreement. The four-year contract includes a 13.75 percent salary increase as well as adds an extra 10 minutes to teachers’ workday, an effective pay cut based on current rates of inflation.

Prior to the strike, teachers had rejected by a 99 percent vote a 10.75 percent salary increase over three years, including the 10-minute increase. That is, the rank and file thoroughly rejected a contract that amounted to a *larger* pay increase per year than the one that was eventually negotiated.

In every district in Massachusetts where teachers went on strike over the past two years—or had voted to strike before last-minute negotiations behind closed doors averted action—contracts agreed to have included raises that fell far below the rate of inflation, never amounting to over 3.5 percent a year.

Teachers in Boston, after working for almost a year without a contract, were undemocratically prevented by the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) from adequately discuss or voting on what was a sellout contract, which

the union framed as taking “significant steps” in meeting teachers’ and students’ needs.

Limited details of the tentative agreement released August 9, 2022, show that the pact includes raises of just over 3 percent per year—far below inflation—and no measures to fight or mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in Boston’s public schools.

In preparation to push through a sellout contract, in March 2022 the BTU adopted a new policy barring members who chose to attend meetings remotely, as many teachers were still doing to protect themselves from COVID, from voting or speaking on the contract. The first information session on the tentative agreement was held “in person with option to view-only on Zoom” and the vote on the agreement was also in-person only.

The BTU described the meeting that approved the contract as 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 did not say was that the vote was 302 in favor and 52 against. In other words, out of a membership of 7,700 active and 3,317 retired workers, fewer than 400 union members—just over 4 percent—voted to ratify the deal.

Each strike by teachers in Massachusetts over the past two years has revealed the following:

1. At each step before a strike took place, the local union leadership, affiliated to either the American Federation of Teachers or National Teachers Association, did everything in its power to avoid taking strike action, including, but not limited to, distorting the nature and details of tentative agreements, suppressing democratic discussion, and pushing through votes without giving members adequate time to study the contract.

2. In the event a strike was imminent or launched, the union in that district failed to coordinate the struggle of its membership with those of teachers and other school workers in other districts across the state facing similar attacks on their wages, jobs and working conditions. After being forced to call a strike, the union leadership sought to isolate that local’s teachers, while making preparations to end the strike as soon as possible.

When Worcester teachers were holding rallies in January of this year, teachers in Melrose, after nearly 200 days working without a contract, voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike. That same month, Woburn teachers also voted to strike, leading to a week-long walkout. At the same time, Weymouth Public Schools teachers were

working without a contract, subsequently rallying in March. And only a month prior, in December 2022, Quincy teachers protested outside school committee meetings to demand better pay and benefits, including more family leave and longevity pay, followed by yet another rally on January 31. Additionally, in May, school bus drivers in Marlborough struck for three days, while school bus drivers in Framingham and Westborough were on the verge of striking.

To coordinate a winning strategy, this growing mass movement of teachers and other workers—who all face cuts in real wages; deteriorating and unsafe working conditions; and the continued mass circulation, mutation and infection of new SARS-CoV-2 strains—must be organized and united in struggle.

Worcester is one of the largest districts in the state, with over 24,300 students enrolled at 45 schools. A strike by teachers in Worcester will draw mass support from workers and teachers in Massachusetts and beyond. A contract that meets the needs of educators will not be achieved by pressuring school committees and local politicians, as the union lyingly tells its members, but can only be won in a turn to fellow workers to build a mass movement of rank-and-file workers *against* these forces.

The needs of the working class are diametrically opposed to the interests of the capitalist class represented by state and local politicians in both the Democratic and Republican parties. The AFT and NEA bureaucracies are in fact key allies of the Democrats that work actively to sabotage the growing upsurge of teachers and other workers who are determined to fight.

The way forward is through the formation of rank-and-file committees to transfer decision-making power from the union bureaucrats to the educators themselves. At the same time, educators must unite with broader sections of the working class, including autoworkers, railroaders, health care workers and others, to defeat the anti-strike laws and austerity measures being imposed by both big-business parties.

Find out more here about building a network of rank-and-file educators, students and parents spearheading the fight to massively expand funding and resources for public education and to stop the spread of COVID-19.



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