

# 2,000 teachers strike in Newton, Massachusetts, the latest in a wave of educator strikes in the state

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Two thousand teachers went on strike Friday in Newton, Massachusetts. After working without a contract since August 31 of last year, an overwhelming 98 percent of the membership of the Newton Teachers Association (NTA) voted to authorize the strike. The Newton School Committee announced Sunday evening that schools would be closed again on Monday as the strike continues.

The Newton strike is the latest in an upsurge of teacher strikes in Massachusetts since 2019, after 12 years without a single strike. Since then, strikes have broken out in Dedham, Sharon, Andover, Brookline, Haverhill, Malden and Woburn, most of them in the last year and a half. Newton is the largest school district in Massachusetts to go on strike so far.

In Newton, teachers are looking for higher wages and better working conditions in the face of the soaring cost of living in one of the most expensive cities in Massachusetts. They are also asking for limiting increases in the cost of health insurance, an improved parental leave policy, having a social worker in every elementary and middle school, and giving additional prep time to elementary school teachers.

Newton, seven miles west of Boston, has the second highest population of millionaires in Massachusetts (1,058 in 2015) after Boston itself (1,617 in 2015). The city had a median household income of \$164,607 as of 2021 and the current average home price is \$1,353,050, up more than 10.3 percent in the last year, which means that many teachers and other workers employed in Newton cannot afford to live there.

The teacher rebellion has unfolded in the shadow of anti-working class laws in Massachusetts against public employee strikes codified during the first Red Scare in 1919, following the Russian Revolution of 1917. Labor action was deemed a socialist conspiracy against capitalism by the ruling class, denounced by their newspapers and outlawed by their politicians throughout the country, who then, as now, feared the power of the unified working class.

Every teachers strike in Massachusetts since 2019 has been declared illegal. In each instance, cities and towns have appealed to the courts seeking massive fines to be levied numbering in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Even before the strike began the Newton school committee had filed a petition to the state labor relations department to stop the strike and punish teachers if they decided to walk out. A state judge issued an injunction ordering

teachers back to work Friday evening.

Newton Mayor Ruthanne Fuller and Governor Maura Healey, both Democrats, are in opposition to the striking teachers, with Fuller calling the strike “disturbing,” and reasserting that it is “illegal.” Healey opposed any legalization of public worker strikes last year, telling WBZ news, a CBS affiliate, that children attending school was “paramount” in relation to the question of workers’ rights. In contrast, the strike has seen broad support by parents and students, who have attended rallies held by the striking teachers in frigid weather.

The school committee has proposed an 8 percent wage increase over three years, well below inflation. The union says it has proposed a 13 percent increase, about 4.3 percent per year, and effectively no better than current core consumer price inflation, most recently calculated at 3.9 percent. This demand fails to address the erosion of teachers’ pay since the pandemic began, with rising costs for housing, food, rent and other necessities due to the massive inflation brought on by the government bailouts of Wall Street and corporate price-gouging. Inflation reached 7 percent in Massachusetts in 2022.

The union has been negotiating with the city for over a year and refused to call a strike even after the teachers’ contract expired. In every teachers’ strike in Massachusetts, the unions have undercut striking teachers, negotiated sellout contracts and agreed to pay the egregious fines imposed by the state. The Newton union leadership is no different.

Mike Zilles, the president of the union in Newton, meekly appealed to the city and its negotiators, “Maybe you don’t think Newton needs to be that competitive, we don’t need to be ‘at the top.’ Maybe not. But I think you would agree that we also don’t want to be at the bottom, and we don’t want employees who work for Newton to feel resentful or demoralized because they know their peers in comparable districts are earning much more.”

A full-time teacher with a master’s degree in the Newton school district currently makes a little over \$60,000 at the lower end of the pay scale and \$93,000 on average, not substantially higher than the state average of \$86,000 for teachers, even including poorer districts in western Massachusetts. The average price of a house in Newton is a staggering \$1.3 million, and the cost of renting an apartment averages about \$3,500 a month, including \$2,000 a month for a studio apartment.

In addition to the out-of-control cost of living in Massachusetts, and in Boston's western suburbs in particular, an inordinate number of teachers are saddled with considerable student debt. According to the National Education Association, almost half of newer teachers in the US have more than \$65,000 in student debt and over a third of teachers aged over 61 still owe at least \$45,000. This is likely higher in Massachusetts, where the cost of attending public colleges is growing at a faster rate than in any other state.

The new COVID surge means that more teachers are being exposed to the virus along with their students, under conditions where the Biden administration has declared the pandemic "over" and all mitigation measures in school buildings and classrooms have been scrapped.

The right-wing character of the union apparatus in Newton is highlighted by the hostile response of Mike Zilles and the NTA to the resolutions passed by the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) in November and December calling for "an immediate and permanent ceasefire" in Gaza and to "stop funding and sending weapons in support of the Netanyahu government's genocidal war on the Palestinian people in Gaza." This was couched in self-defeating terms of appeals to the Biden administration, rather than seeking to mobilize the working class internationally against the Gaza genocide and calling for action to halt the shipment of military equipment to Israel.

A separate resolution pledged to "develop a framework for discussing a set of curriculum resources for learning about the history and current events in Israel and Occupied Palestine."

The Newton teachers union, which is affiliated with the MTA, nevertheless took a thoroughly reactionary position regarding these resolutions. Zilles told the *Boston Globe* that the MTA's resolutions were "offensive. "It was dog whistling ... If they weren't aware of the fact that the way they worded the statement was going to elicit antisemitism, then shame on them. If they did know, even more shame on them."

The NTA demanded that the MTA retract its statement, which the Newton union's executive committee smeared as one which "will provoke further antisemitism, and it is callous," while explicitly denying events in Gaza are a genocide and declaring that the Newton union "unequivocally dissociates itself from [the MTA's] statement, and in particular from its antisemitic dog-whistling." Charges of "antisemitism" have been used throughout the world by the capitalist media and government officials to slander legitimate opposition to the genocide in Gaza and to the support for it by the imperialist governments.

The rebellion of teachers in Massachusetts is part of what the WSWs described in its statement on January 3 as:

... a significant *quantitative* and *qualitative* development of the class struggle. The quantitative is the undoubted growth in the sheer number of workers who have engaged in strikes and related forms of protest against exploitation, declining living standards, attacks on democratic rights and militarism. The qualitative development is the global scale of the class struggle, the tendency of the movement of the working class to sweep over national borders.

As the statement pointed out, there was a jump in 2023 in strike activity in the US, with nearly 500,000 workers participating in major strikes, almost four times as many as in 2022. In October alone, 4.5 million days were lost from work stoppages, the most in 40 years. Seven major strikes involved teachers and graduate students.

The international dimension of these developments is clear, with millions of workers worldwide involved and major strikes emerging across all labor sectors. In late December in Quebec, Canada, 420,000 public sector workers including those in health and education struck for a week. The struggle of teachers in Newton is enmeshed with and inseparable from that of their class brothers and sisters throughout the world.

In the face of the Newton Teachers Association leadership's cynical and bankrupt approach to their negotiations with the city, Newton educators must form a rank-and-file committee to demand substantial wage increases that keep pace with future inflation and improvements in working conditions, including more affordable health care, more parental leave, better staffing and improved COVID protective measures.

None of Newton teachers' dues money should be turned over to the state as punishment for striking. To fight for these goals requires the unity of rank-and-file teachers in all state districts, nationwide and with workers throughout the world. The Newton teachers must not be isolated!

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, calls for bringing together workers to build these committees in every industry and across the world to fight against the assault on workers' conditions. This means breaking with the pro-corporate union bureaucracy and both big business parties.



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