

With end of 11-day Newton, Mass. teachers strike, union faces \$1 million in fines

Kate Randall
4 February 2024

Late Friday, February 2, the Newton Teachers Association (NTA) and the Newton School Committee announced an end to the strike by 2,000 teachers that had shut down classes in the suburb west of Boston for 11 days. The strike was the longest by teachers in the state of Massachusetts since the 1990s.

The NTA planned to hold a vote on the contract over the weekend, but the union agreed to notify “all employees that the strike is canceled and its members must return to work immediately,” regardless of the outcome of the vote. Strikes of teachers and other public sector workers are illegal in Massachusetts, as they are in 37 US states and the District of Columbia.

The school committee, which has been negotiating a contract with the NTA for almost a year and for months after the current contract expired in August 2023, immediately reacted to the outbreak of the strike on January 19 by appealing to the courts to impose huge fines against the teachers. By Friday, Middlesex County Superior Court Judge Christopher Barry-Smith had fined the NTA a total of \$625,000, which is due to be paid to the state by Monday, February 5.

As the teachers continued their strike, they came under growing attack from the courts, the state government and the media to end it. On Thursday, Governor Maura Healy, a Democrat, threatened to break the strike by asking the judge to appoint an arbitrator to order the NTA and the Newton School Committee to come to a binding agreement to force teachers back into classrooms.

Talks had broken down Thursday when the school committee demanded that the NTA pay \$1 million to the city for “costs of the strike,” including for police details. As part of the Return-to-Work Agreement, the NTA and school committee agreed to request that the Superior Court “reduce some or all of the contempt fines” imposed by the court so that those funds could instead be paid by the NTA to the Newton Public Schools to cover strike-related costs.

The agreement further states, “In no event shall the Committee be paid less than a total sum of \$275,000.00.” There is no guarantee that the court will reduce any or all of the fines imposed. The NTA potentially could be obligated to pay \$625,000 to the state and \$275,000 to the Newton Public

Schools, for a total of \$900,000.

Much has been made of the supposedly lucrative salaries of Newton teachers, who earned on average \$93,031 a year in 2020-2021, with bottom-step teachers earning \$61,899. Newton, in the Greater Boston area, had a median household income of \$164,607 as of 2021 and is home to the second highest number of millionaires anywhere in the state outside of Boston. Most teachers cannot afford to live in the city where they work, where most homes sell for over \$1 million.

Teachers’ aides and other paraprofessionals in Unit C, who shoulder key responsibilities in the classroom, earned only \$21.83 an hour at the bottom step in 2022-2023. Before the strike, teacher and paraprofessional pay was below that of other high-income suburbs west of Boston.

The NTA had proposed 21.5 percent in pay increases for teachers over four years. In the end, they agreed to 12.6 percent. The union proposed starting wage increases of 21.5 percent over four years for paraprofessionals but agreed to 12.6 percent, plus some one-time payments of \$500 to \$1,100 for full-time Unit C educators.

The union had proposed a minimum of one social worker be assigned to each school building. The contract makes no such provision, only a “side letter” that commits a social worker in all but three buildings. The contract increases parental leave to a maximum of 60 days but with only the first 20 days to be fully paid by the district.

There are no provisions in the contract for mitigation measures in schools against COVID-19, which has seen a surge in the Northeast region of the country and threatens the health and lives of students, teachers and their families.

The Newton strike is the latest and largest in a wave of teachers strikes that have rocked the state since 2019. Before a strike in Dedham ended this lull in 2019, there had been a 12-year gap between teachers strikes. Since then, there have been strikes in Sharon, Andover, Brookline, Haverhill, Malden and Woburn. The rapid emergence of these strikes testifies to the growing militancy of educators around the country amid a period marked by the pandemic, soaring costs of living and deepening social inequality.

The school committee, the city of Newton and the mainstream press have reacted with venom to the teachers’

strike and their demands. The *Boston Globe* has run several hit pieces against the teachers, blaming them for being solely responsible for students' lost time at school. An opinion piece by Jeff Jacoby called for all the teachers to be fired, citing the example set by Ronald Reagan when he fired more than 11,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization in August 1981.

Jacoby declared, "Unlike in the private sector, strikes by public employees are designed to inflict distress not on management but on innocent third parties—ordinary citizens—and to deploy that distress as a bargaining weapon." According to this view, teachers have no right to withhold their labor under conditions where cuts across public education at the local, state and federal levels are targeting the right to high quality education.

Many Newton parents and residents have been supportive of the teachers' demands, although as the strike continued and vitriol mounted against the teachers from the school committee and in the press, several parents filed bullying motions to the court demanding that the teachers be forcibly ordered back to work or, in one case, calling for NTA President Mike Zilles to be arrested and jailed.

Educators and workers must fight against the attempts to seize the dues money of educators and other public sector workers as punishment for striking in the face of these reactionary no-strike laws. Rank-and-file Newton teachers must demand an end to the attack on their right to strike by the capitalist courts.

There is a bitter history in Massachusetts of attacks on striking teachers. In Franklin, the Great Teachers' Strike of 1977 saw 286 educators strike over pay, seniority and maternity leave. The Franklin School Committee demanded that the teachers return to work or face losing their jobs. When teachers refused to return to the classrooms, 34 teachers were arrested in a single day, followed by 100 arrests a week later.

The teachers were fined \$950 each, the equivalent of several thousand dollars today, and a judge handed down indefinite sentences for contempt of court charges to groups of teachers. When the teachers were finally forced back to work after 14 days, the Franklin Education Association had been fined \$150,000. Teachers had to pay their own \$950 fines or face returning to jail.

In this year's Newton strike, as in other teachers strikes in recent years, the NTA, along with their parent unions—the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) and the National Education Association (NEA)—have refused to mobilize educators across the state, New England and the US to back the striking teachers.

In this, they have followed the lead of the UAW, the Teamsters and other unions, which have isolated their memberships and forced through rotten contracts that have resulted in massive layoffs and deterioration of already abysmal working conditions.

In 2022, the Biden administration, with the collusion of union leaders, imposed a sellout deal that outlawed rail workers' right to strike. The president visited the picket lines of autoworkers in 2023 and hailed the contract reached with the Big Three automakers, a deal which laid the ground for the mass layoffs now taking place in the auto industry.

Members of the Massachusetts congressional delegation, all of whom are Democrats, offered toothless statements of support for the Newton strike. Meanwhile, Newton Mayor Ruthanne Fuller, also a Democrat, denounced the teachers as "greedy and unrealistic."

Like her counterparts at the Massachusetts State House and in the US Congress, she claims that there is "no money" to fund vitally needed increases in public education and other social programs. This claim is made as trillions of dollars are funneled into Wall Street and the US war machine.

Randi Weingarten, president of the other major educators union, the American Federation of Teachers, is a member of the Democratic Party National Committee and has supported "Israel's right to defend itself," as well as refusing to call for an end to the genocide by the Israel Defense Forces in Gaza. She has also supported the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia, while covering up the historical crimes of Ukrainian fascism.

The experience of the Newton strike demonstrates that the teachers' union apparatus, and their political masters in the Democratic Party, will not defend educators' right to pay and conditions that reflect their indispensable and highly skilled role in society.

Rank-and-file committees of educators, in alliance with students and parents, must be organized in every school district to secure contracts that provide livable wages and working conditions to all school workers. Educators and residents must organize across districts to counter any threats of fines and criminal penalties faced by educators who strike to defend their interests.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact