St. Paul teachers to vote on strike Thursday, as Minneapolis teachers kept on job without contract

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Are you a teacher or education worker in the Twin Cities? We want to hear from you: Fill out the form at the end to tell us about your working conditions and what you think teachers should be fighting for.

After working since July without a contract, nearly 3,700 teachers, education assistants and other public school workers in St. Paul, Minnesota, will vote this coming Thursday on whether to authorize a strike.

Meanwhile, roughly 4,500 educators in neighboring Minneapolis have also been kept working without a contract since last summer. Despite this, the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) union has yet to schedule a strike authorization vote and last month requested a state mediator, with mediation sessions set to begin February 29.

Educators throughout the public schools systems in the Twin Cities are confronting problems which are endemic throughout the US: declining real incomes, understaffing and overcrowded classrooms, schools starved of funding, the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and myriad other symptoms of the social crisis.

Teachers and school workers are determined to win far higher pay increases, more resources for special education programs and reduced caseloads, more mental health staff, more funding for recruitment, and better, more affordable health insurance plans.

One educator in the Twin Cities commented on Facebook, “We shouldn’t be paying more for our ‘benefits’ than our employer does. Three years ago, the district contribution covered 76% of my insurance premiums, and this year it’s down to 63% of the same plan.”

Another educator added, “Teachers should never have to choose between getting the wage and benefit increase they deserve OR supporting students and families. The system needs to find a way to do both! It is what we all deserve!”

Far from offering substantial improvements to pay and working conditions, however, both Minneapolis and St. Paul school districts are threatening major budget cuts. “We are deficit spending this year,” said St. Paul Public Schools finance chief Tom Sager recently, “and so we have to course-correct that to create a structurally balanced budget.” Minneapolis Public Schools officials, for their part, have stated they intend to cut $90 million and that “everything is on the table.”

Administrators in both cities, like their counterparts nationally, have sought to justify cuts by pointing to a looming fiscal crisis, as millions in federal COVID-19 relief funds are scheduled to end in September.

The Biden administration has moved to cut off the funding, in itself inadequate to resolve the dire underfunding of public schools, under the fraudulent pretext that the pandemic is “over.” Students returned to school this year amid one of the largest surges of COVID-19 brought about by the new JN.1 subvariant of Omicron, which has been reported by Biobot Analytics wastewater analysis. Models based on wastewater data predict that 426,000 to 1.7 million cases of long COVID will result from the last two months of infections. The Democratic and Republican parties have both rolled back virtually any protective measures against the spread of the virus.

At the same time, the White House has worked with both parties in Congress to pass an unprecedented $886 billion military spending budget for 2024, while funneling tens of billions more towards the war in Ukraine and Israel’s genocidal war against Gaza.

The 2022 contract battle

This year, both St. Paul and Minneapolis educators are confronting the aftermath of the 2022 contract fight, when teachers’ demands for 20 percent and higher pay increases to make up for wages lost to inflation were reduced to measly 2-3 percent increases by the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, far behind the inflation rate of 8 percent in 2022, and still eclipsed by the current inflation rate of 3.4 percent. The contract for St. Paul educators resulted in similarly paltry pay increases of just 2 percent annually, which were additionally eaten up by increased premiums for insurance, further straining educators.

In an indication of the disastrous conditions which have persisted in Minneapolis Public Schools following the contract, over 20 percent of Minneapolis teachers have left for districts in the suburbs since then, according to the MFT’s own numbers.

The day before St. Paul and Minneapolis teachers were set to begin a simultaneous strike in 2022, Minneapolis teachers were isolated by a last-minute deal between the St. Paul Federation of Educators union and St. Paul Public Schools. This effort to divide teachers in the two cities was facilitated by Democratic St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter.

In Minneapolis, the MFT oversaw a limited strike for a month, refusing to appeal to either teachers in St. Paul or other sections of the working class in the region to join and broaden the walkout. The union apparatus wore teachers down while it prepared efforts to force educators into accepting a sellout deal.

While the MFT engaged in impotent gestures aimed at diffusing

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teachers' anger, they surrendered on the main demands of teachers for higher wages to match soaring inflation, limits on class sizes through the hiring of more teachers, and more funding for the creation of jobs and for several other necessities to give schoolchildren adequate education and resources. Instead, the MFT inserted language into the contract enabling loopholes in class size limits to the point where they are unenforceable.

Significantly, both the MFT and school administrators promoted and agreed to a reactionary "educators of color" memorandum which required that layoffs be determined on the basis of race. Based on the lying pretext that there are not enough resources to provide good-paying jobs, the provision was aimed at driving a wedge between teachers and inciting a fratricidal struggle over dwindling jobs.

To secure a "yes" vote on the contract, the MFT exerted pressure and delayed giving access to the contract for its members.

A Minneapolis special education teacher told the WSWS at the time, "We sacrificed a lot, and we are not done fighting. The union is pressuring its members to vote 'yes.' There has been a disturbing campaign to shame and blame dissenting opinions."

Form rank-and-file committees to fight for higher wages, better working conditions and full funding for public schools!

Today, attempts to isolate St. Paul and Minneapolis educators and impose even more devastating austerity agreements are again being prepared by the union bureaucracies, in close coordination with the Democratic Party, which has dominated Minnesota politics and starved the school system of funding for decades. Education workers confront a struggle not just against hard-hearted school administrators; in fact, they are engaged in a political struggle against the Democratic Party and the entire political establishment.

Teachers confront a fight also against pseudo-left organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which has revealed itself ever more clearly as complicit in the criminal policies of the Democratic Party in the US and internationally. The DSA has integrated into the upper echelons of the unions, including the MFT, and has members on the city council of both Minneapolis and St. Paul.

The demands of St. Paul and Minneapolis teachers can be won, but only if St. Paul teachers are united with Minneapolis teachers in a joint struggle, as well as with teachers throughout Minnesota and across the nation.

In order for the fight to be placed on a serious footing, rank-and-file committees should be organized at each school, led by the most militant teachers and classroom support workers.

Rank-and-file committees will enable educators across the Twin Cities to communicate with each other, prepare coordinated action, and draw up a list of demands based on workers' actual needs and those of their students.

Such demands should include a 40 percent wage increase to make up for years of below-inflation raises; adequate funding to limit class sizes; and additional funding to facilitate the hiring of support staff and maintenance of school buildings.

In addition, the demand should be raised immediately that any strike must be conducted in unison across the Twin Cities. To that end, teachers in Minneapolis should demand that a date for a strike authorization vote be set as soon as possible.

Educators should take confidence that the working class will support them. Teachers were and are part of an increasingly international movement of the working class, which is being thrust into a battle to defend jobs, wages and all of its basic rights.

Last December, a strike of 3,700 Portland Public Schools (PPS) educators was shut down three weeks after an agreement between the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) and PPS. Like MPS teachers, Portland educators were on strike to secure better wages and smaller class sizes by hiring additional teachers, additional support staff and funding to address the decaying facilities. Throughout the strike, the Portland Association of Teachers refused to expand the strike to surrounding teachers and sections of workers.

The union bureaucracies—including the MFT and SPFE and their national parent organizations (the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association)—are controlled by the Democratic Party. Their function is to block the development of an independent, united and *political* struggle of teachers with other sections of the working class in defense of education.

Like the Republicans, the Democratic Party is a party of austerity, Wall Street, and war, and has long been behind attacks on public education in the Twin Cities and nationwide. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, both parties have prioritized corporate profits over human lives. Now the Biden administration, in addition to escalating the war with Russia in Ukraine, is fully backing Israel's war on Gaza and is expanding the use of military force throughout the Middle East.

The fight for better conditions is bound up with a struggle against the genocide in Gaza, where Israel's main targets for destruction have been universities, schools and educators themselves, including the January 17 destruction of Israa University in Gaza City, which was the last standing university in Gaza. As of the beginning of this month, over 231 teachers or administrators and 4,237 students have been killed since the beginning of Israel's onslaught.

While the Democcrats tell teachers there is not enough money for education, the Biden administration has provided billions of dollars in aid for Israel and Ukraine. Just last week, the Biden administration demanded an additional $60 billion in aid for Ukraine, $14 billion for Israel, and $10 billion for preparations for war with China.

The vital question is that of leadership. Teachers should place no confidence in the MFT and the SPFE bureaucracies, as these organizations have repeatedly demonstrated their subservience to the capitalist Democratic Party and its attacks on workers. The mobilization of the collective strength of teachers, along with the entire working class, requires new, working class organizations of struggle, based on a new political perspective—that the rights of workers, not considerations of private profit, must determine how society's resources are organized.

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