

Minnesota: 8,000 janitorial workers plan March 4 walkout; 3,700 St. Paul teachers set to strike on March 11

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In the coming weeks, thousands of workers in Minnesota are gearing up to strike. The St. Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) reported that last Thursday, 92 percent of St. Paul teachers voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike. The SPFE has around 3,700 members, including teachers, educational assistants and service professionals.

St. Paul teachers have been kept working without a contract for over seven months. The SPFE is engaged in mediation sessions with the school district, with another meeting set for March 1. If an agreement is not reached, teachers will strike on March 11.

St. Paul Public Schools negotiators have offered an insulting 2-3 percent raise for teachers in the first year which falls below the current inflation rate of 3.1 percent and fails to compensate for the erosion of pay by previous inflation rates of up to 8 percent in the last two years. Meanwhile, the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) has left nearly 4,500 educators in Minneapolis working under an expired contract since last summer. MFT has yet to even schedule a strike authorization vote; instead, it has chosen to work with a state mediator and start mediation sessions on February 29.

In both Minneapolis and St. Paul, education workers are seeking to fight back against falling living standards, understaffing, long hours and degrading working conditions.

A Minneapolis Public Schools teacher told the WSWS, “Some issues I face daily are large class sizes. Thirty-four students in one class. When I have less than 28 there are no behavior issues. Our school lacks both the training needed and the time necessary to connect

with families.

“Often conferences are scheduled after eight hours of work and/or for a 12-hour day. This week I spent a few hours after school emailing and calling parents to talk about their children, and I feel I know my students and families better in order to serve them better. This time spent is strained as I most often feel behind in my grading, which I spend some personal time on.

“The staff bathroom is unclean, with grime and stains on the floor. I have been asking myself lately if this is how I want to be treated. Struggling to make it in the career I love and went to graduate school for.”

The strike authorization by St. Paul teachers and opposition among Minneapolis educators is part of the growing wave of working class struggles in Minnesota and worldwide.

On Monday morning, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 26 announced that some 8,000 janitors, security officers, airport and other workers were scheduled to strike on March 4 in the event that agreements with roughly a dozen employers are not reached before then. The workers are employed to clean big box retailers, such as Target and Best Buy, as well as other firms.

Last week, 99 percent of 400 Minneapolis public works employees voted to authorize a strike. On March 5, 1,000 nursing home workers, members of SEIU Healthcare Minnesota, are scheduled to take part in a one-day strike to demand better working conditions, citing issues of being overworked, understaffed and underpaid.

The rising militancy among workers in Minnesota is part of an overall growth of the class struggle across the

US and internationally. According to the US Department of Labor, last year saw 33 major labor strikes involving more than 450,000 workers, the highest number in over two decades.

While section after section of workers is demonstrating their determination to fight for their interests, they are repeatedly running up against the treachery of the trade union bureaucracies, which are operating as agents of the corporations and employers. In one battle after another, the bureaucracies have worked to either block strikes, or if they cannot prevent them, isolate them and shut them down on the companies' terms.

A warning must be made: The last thing either the SPFE and SEIU union apparatuses want is a strike, which would threaten to coalesce into a broader movement of the working class that could develop into a political confrontation with the Democratic Party in an election year. Both will do everything in their power to force through pro-management agreements, potentially announced as "last-minute" deals.

Should any of the union leaderships feel they have no choice but to call a strike due to the level of workers' anger, they would do so with the sole objective of containing and isolating the walkouts, and shutting it down as quickly as possible.

There is an enormous objective potential for workers in Minnesota to unify their struggles and bring their collective strength to bear. But to do so, it is necessary to organize rank-and-file committees under workers' democratic control.

Both St. Paul and Minneapolis educators are dealing with the fallout from the teachers unions' betrayal of the 2022 contract fight. In 2022, a powerful position was held by teachers with a potential joint strike. To block this, a last-minute deal was accepted by the SPFE, influenced by a visit from Democratic Party St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter.

Teachers' demands for 20 percent or more pay increases to offset inflation losses were quickly reduced to 2-3 percent increases by the MFT, following the isolation of St. Paul and Minneapolis teachers, which lagged far behind the 8 percent inflation rate of 2022 and the current rate of 3.4 percent. The St. Paul educators' contract resulted in similarly below-inflation pay increases of just 2 percent annually, further diminished by higher insurance premiums.

The issues of wages and school conditions are inherently political, with both the union and the school district led by and closely tied to the Democratic Party, which has overseen and enforced decades of attacks on public education.

According to the 2021-2023 St. Paul contract, a school worker's starting salary is a poverty wage of just \$34,316. Meanwhile, the reported \$108 million budget shortfall among schools in the Twin Cities area—which is being used to justify the brutal cuts—pales in comparison to the hundreds of billions of dollars the Democratic Party, along with their fascist counterparts in the Republican Party, allocate to military spending and war.

In the context of St. Paul teachers, the school district cites "wages, health insurance, and other costly proposals" as the main unresolved issues, against a backdrop of billions being diverted to war efforts. The suppression of opposition to war is highlighted by incidents such as the suspension of Edina High School students for protesting the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

SEIU, for its part, has its own well documented record of betrayals of its members' interests. In one of the most recent in September, SEIU Local 1000 announced the ratification of a contract covering over 100,000 California government workers, despite numerous irregularities reported in the vote. This sellout contract included minimal annual wage increases of between 3 and 4 percent for the next three years, well below inflation rates.

The most urgent task now is for workers to begin establishing rank-and-file committees to take control of their struggles and unite the efforts of teachers with public works employees, janitors and all other workers.



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