

St. Paul, Minnesota teachers contract “highlights” reveal sellout agreement

Matt Rigel
11 March 2024

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 what you think about the tentative agreement and what you think teachers should be fighting for.

On Monday, teachers and education workers in St. Paul, Minnesota, began voting on a tentative agreement for a new two-year contract, with voting set to last through Wednesday. The Saint Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) union had announced a deal with the school district on March 5, calling off a strike by 3,700 educators which had been scheduled to begin Monday, March 11.

While the SPFE officials have hailed the tentative agreement as a major victory, anger has been growing quickly against the deal among teachers and education assistants, who have suffered years of below-inflation wage increases, ever-more unmanageable class sizes and workloads, and the rollback of virtually all protections from COVID-19.

Educators in both St. Paul and neighboring Minneapolis have been kept on the job without a contract since July. Last month, educators in St. Paul voted by an overwhelming 92 percent to strike, seeking to join the growing upsurge of class struggle in the US and internationally.

While SPFE officials have praised the deal, they have yet to allow their members to read the full contract. Instead, the union held two online meetings last Thursday where they gave workers just 25 pages of “highlights” of the agreement.

The few details which were released already reveal that a new austerity contract is being pushed on SPPS educators, assistants and community service professionals:

- The new conditions include paltry variable wage increases that range from \$3,000-\$3,500 in the first year for licensed staff and school community service professionals (SCSPs), to a \$2.25 an hour increase for education assistants, who are among the lowest paid. In the second year, all job categories would see a miserly 4 percent raise.

The contract would result in another de facto pay cut for many SPPS educators and support staff, whose pay increases would differ little from the insulting 2-3 percent raises offered by SPPS, and it also does not include back pay. Moreover, the flat dollar amount increases for licensed staff and SCSPs in the first year would mean that those in the higher step and lane levels would receive a smaller percentage raise—a deliberate move by the district and SPFE to pit newer and more senior school workers against each other.

- On insurance, virtually all employees will see increased premiums, with the contract summary stating it “assumes” an 8 percent increase to premiums in the second year. The district agreed only to raise its

contributions towards premiums by a flat, inadequate amount. The SPFE is selling the fact that the SPPS will pay 50 percent of the increased premium in 2026. Additionally, no language in the highlights can be found specifying an increase in the quality of coverage. This combined with the paltry wage increases is yet another insult to educators and support staff.

- The new tentative agreement makes no progress in class sizes. Instead, in the contract highlights, the SPFE states that “current class sizes remain,” which are already intolerable.

District officials have boasted that the proposed contract stayed within their budget limits and will not add to the school system’s deficit. “We set up parameters that we work from, and we’ve stayed very close there,” said SPPS Superintendent Joe Gothard, standing alongside SPFE representatives at a joint press conference last week.

Gothard made clear that the contract would be the prelude to massive cuts, stating “there are still some very hard budget decisions that will have to be made.”

Union leaders, for their part, sought to lower expectations among their members, saying, “No one contract campaign can fix all of the things that we need for our students and for our educators.”

School district administrations around the US are planning a new and brutal wave of cost cutting, citing a looming “fiscal cliff” in relation to the end of federal COVID-19 relief funds this fall. Democratic and Republican politicians have joined hands to pull the plug on pandemic aid, even as COVID-19 continues to infect millions every week, and public education remains starved of funding following the 2008-2009 recession.

In an effort to pin the blame on teachers, it is all but certain that school officials will seek to justify the “very hard decisions” to slash costs by pointing to increased spending, however pitiful, in the contract.

Educators should consider: If the contract summary presents the “highlights,” what are the “lowlights,” i.e., the concessions which have not yet been revealed?

The reality is that the SPFE apparatus is attempting to ram through another sellout contract before educators fully understand what is happening. SPFE members should demand the immediate release of the full contract language and all “memoranda of understanding,” and at least a week to study and discuss the agreement.

Based upon what has already been revealed about the contract, however, there is already ample reason for teachers to vote “no.” A powerful rejection of the austerity agreement would be the starting point for uniting with educators in neighboring Minneapolis, as well as the more than 4,000 janitors still without a contract.

To organize the opposition, share information and coordinate their

struggles across different cities and industries, educators should form rank-and-file committees, i.e., democratic committees under workers' control.

Such committees would also provide the means for teachers and school workers to draw up a list of demands based on their actual needs, not what the administration or union leaders claim is "affordable." Such demands should include:

- Pay raises large enough to make up for decades of eroding pay and skyrocketing inflation in recent years and adequate to provide a decent standard of living to all school workers.

- Fully paid-for healthcare coverage.

- Strict class size caps at levels agreed upon by rank-and-file educators across SPPS and MPS schools. To meet these, the SPPS should be required to hire new teachers immediately to meet these levels.

- Additional staff hired to handle pressing student mental health issues.

- Urgent repairs to facilities should be made a priority for all facilities across St. Paul.

St. Paul teacher: "It just didn't pass the smell test"

Educators are increasingly voicing their opposition to the tentative agreement. A veteran educator who has been with SPPS for 20 years and teaches high school special ed spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* over the weekend:

"We're getting a \$3,500 year payment for all staff for the first year, which for lower-paid staff amounts to as high as 7 percent for a raise, but for others it's around 3 or 4 percent, and the second year is a 4 percent raise. This does not include back pay for the six months that we have been working without this contract.

"When we ask the union why, they simply tell us that it is higher than what the district initially offered. Of course, it's going to be higher than what the district offered, because they offered us nothing. It's like they are insulting our intelligence.

"Initially, they passed off the raises as a 'historic' victory. The Zoom meeting required pre-registration, and every attendee was monitored. When they announced the tentative agreements as this 'historic' win, with all of these 'highlights,' Joe Gothard was there smiling, and guess who else? [Democratic St. Paul Mayor] Melvin Carter. That is how we just knew this was not good for us—it just didn't pass the smell test."

The teacher also recalled the previous stunt by the SPFE, where a last-minute tentative agreement was reached in order to block a unified strike of Minneapolis and St. Paul workers. "[In 2022] we also knew what was going on when the SPFE brought out Melvin Carter to speak to us.

"What I've been seeing as a special ed teacher is that all teachers' caseloads are too high, and we do not have enough time to get any work finished." He continued, "The union has promised to protect us when our caseloads do get too high. However, there's no language in our current contract that protects us. I would like for it to have some teeth rather than just an empty promise."

Noting that the contract language contains an increase to a full day per month to finish due process work, he explained its inadequacy, stating, "It's a pain to call in to arrange a substitute for a due process

day because it's already tough to find people who are willing to do this work."

He pointed to the broader social and political processes starving schools of funding. "There is money, but what money is there is mostly reserved for the war machine. The SPFE and MFT, and unions in general, are completely beholden to the Democratic National Committee." When a WSWS reporter explained the call to form rank-and-file committees, he agreed, saying, "I'm all for new organizations," he continued.

The SPFE is holding this vote as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and various "community" organizations in the orbit of the Democratic Party are seeking to actively sabotage workers' opposition and anger at their conditions. This has taken the form of a "Week of Action" campaign where they have promoted a strategy of limited and isolated strikes under the phony slogan of "What We Could Win Together."

As part of this effort, the SEIU rushed tentative agreements of retail janitors, airport workers and security guards, separating them from over 4,000 office janitors. The SEIU called out the office janitors on strike for just three days, subsequently announcing another "historic" tentative agreement with the companies that the local media is already treating as if it has passed.

The SPFE and the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT)—along with their parent institutions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers—as well as the SEIU are collaborating with the big business Democratic Party to break the unity of teachers and workers.

SPFE is attempting to push through this contract because they are subordinate to the Democratic Party, which is engaged in advanced preparations for war with Russia and China. This is acutely represented by the ongoing US-Israeli genocide in Gaza, funded by both political parties of Wall Street, with the Biden administration declaring there are no "red lines" for Israel on multiple occasions.

The Democrats are seeking billions in additional funding for this war, and they demand it from the working class. In this case, the SPFE is carrying out their bidding in attempting to force this contract through, fearful that an all-out, united struggle across the Twin Cities and the region would develop into a direct political conflict with the Democratic Party in an election year.

But there is widespread and growing anger throughout the working class against poverty wages, austerity and endless spending on war. If they take control of their struggle, St. Paul teachers can be the spearhead of a movement to secure the needs and interests of the working class as a whole.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact