

# St. Paul and Minneapolis Public Schools reveal plans to cut hundreds of jobs and gut student programs

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Minnesota educators at St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS) and Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) confront massive budget cuts for the next school year, threatening the jobs and livelihoods of educators, as well as vital student programs and activities.

MPS administrators say the district is facing a \$110 million budget deficit, and cuts are being planned across all schools. SPPS is reporting a \$107 million budget deficit, with officials floating plans to slash afterschool programs, custodial food service and support staff, among others.

District officials in both cities have made clear they are planning virtually unprecedented cuts. St. Paul Superintendent Joe Gothard told a school board meeting Wednesday, "While we have made significant progress toward a balanced budget and should be proud of where we are today, the fact remains that the cuts we are facing are larger than we've ever faced before."

Minneapolis Superintendent Lisa Sayles-Adams, for her part, told a school board meeting in late March, "This budget is unlike many others in recent memory."

Minneapolis Senior Financial Officer Ibrahima Diop said, "It's the biggest gap that I've seen so far. ... As we prepare for proposed reductions and eliminations, we are planning the operational changes necessary to continue to serve our students in the short and long term."

Implicit in the statements of district officials is the lying argument that there is simply not enough money, and brutal cuts are unavoidable. But to put the budget shortfalls in perspective: The richest man in Minnesota is Glen Taylor, according to Forbes, with a net worth of \$2.9 billion. Taylor is owner of the Taylor printing company and the 1,088th wealthiest man in the world. He could easily cover the shortfalls and still be a multi-billionaire.

Minnesota-based corporate giants such as UnitedHealth Group, 3M, Target, Best Buy and others, meanwhile, have all reaped billions in profits in recent years, while benefiting from tax breaks overseen by both Democratic and Republican administrations.

The school cuts in Minnesota are part of a nationwide attack on public education. The largest attacks since at least the 2008-09 Great Recession are being planned and implemented in cities across the US.

In response, teacher and student opposition is building. Last month, educators, students, bus drivers and community supporters of educators rallied to oppose plans for massive cuts planned by the Wayne-Westland Community Schools District board in the Detroit area, temporarily blocking the plans. Earlier in March, in Flint, Michigan, teachers organized a one-day sickout in opposition to the school district's decision

to overturn pay raises awarded in their contract. Both actions were initiated by rank-and-file educators.

While teachers have been looking for a way to fight back, the union apparatuses have been doing everything possible to contain opposition and prevent strikes. The National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers are both intensely concerned about preventing struggles from erupting during an election year, for fear that they would develop into a political confrontation with the Democratic Party.

In a blunt admission of the union's determination to prevent a walkout, Minnesota Federation of Teachers (MFT) President Greta Callahan, who is also running for a school board seat, said in late March, "What we are desperately trying to avoid right now is another strike. ... we don't want that to happen again."

In the midst of ongoing contract "negotiations" between the MFT and MPS, MFT requested mediated sessions beginning February 29. Since then, the MFT has initiated a campaign of fruitless appeals to the MPS board to use state funding to raise wages and improve school conditions. The union leadership, however, has absolutely no intention of winning the 8.5-7.5 percent wage increases it claims to be pursuing, having shown it was willing to drastically climb down from its wage demands in the 2022 strike.

In neighboring St. Paul, educators are being confronted with plans for tens of millions of dollars in cuts just a few weeks after the Saint Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) union rammed through what it claimed was "a strong contract and fair contract."

Anger and opposition is growing among educators, but it must find an organized outlet. Rank-and-file committees of teachers and education workers should be built at every school throughout the Twin Cities in order to share information, link up with teachers nationally and prepare a coordinated struggle to stop job cuts and ensure that the needs of educators and students are fully met.

## Minneapolis

The details of the proposed Minneapolis Public School cuts are devastating:

- Two hundred or more full-time positions could be eliminated, including in various departments, such as music, nursing, custodial staff, content experts, IT workers, athletics, transportation and special education.

- Some departments could see budget reductions up to nearly 60 percent, with at least 20 departments affected.

- Class sizes would increase in schools, where fewer than 70 percent of

students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

- Student support services could face around a 23 percent budget cut, eliminating nearly 30 positions, including nurses and counselors.

Behind the backs of teachers, plans for a new round of school closures are being prepared. According to the local *Sahan Journal*, “Finance officials estimated that closing 22 schools would save the district \$23 million annually,” but district administrators have yet to reveal formal plans for closures or consolidations.

As elsewhere, the cuts planned in the Twin Cities will make deteriorating conditions far worse. At Patrick Henry High School in impoverished North Minneapolis, literacy coach and teacher Sarah Spleiss told local Minneapolis news station Fox 9 that after recent heavy rains and snowfall last week, the school suffered water leaking from ceilings, drenched floors and crumbling tiles. Some classes were forced to move, while some students sat in class with water leaks near their desks.

Spleiss told Fox 9, “Our district also has not communicated to us any substantial plan for how they are going to fix the problem instead of just patch it because that’s what they have been doing for years. This is not the first time.”

School administrators and the media have sought to justify the budget cuts by pointing to declining enrollment numbers. The district’s enrollment has decreased by approximately 20,000 students since 2000-01, with a notable drop of 16 percent since before the pandemic and 43 percent since the early 2000s. Charter school enrollment has contributed to roughly one-fifth of the recent enrollment losses, equating to about 19,000 students. While K-12 enrollment has been relatively stable statewide, Minneapolis schools have experienced a more significant drop, losing over 35 percent of their students since 2005.

As in other major cities, the decline in enrollment is in large part the product of a deliberate vicious cycle, as Democratic and Republican administrations starve schools of resources, driving parents to transfer their children to private or better-funded districts, resulting in declining enrollments in urban areas and the pretext for further cuts and school closures. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic, which both parties have allowed to run rampant, has had a devastating impact on the health and development of young people, with millions suffering from Long COVID.

## St. Paul

St. Paul educators are similarly facing massive cuts, unveiled in the aftermath of the Saint Paul Federation of Educators’ (SPFE) recent sellout contract.

Local press has already begun shifting blame for the impending \$107.5 million budget deficit onto workers, claiming that that contract has increased costs by \$37 million. Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) faces \$5-10 million cuts in programs ranging from pandemic aid to food service, facilities, supplies and afterschool programs. Half of the proposed cuts are aimed directly at pandemic aid programs in SPPS schools, amounting to a dismantling of COVID-19 protections. Additionally, \$10.9 million could be cut from training and study time for teachers.

On Wednesday, Saint Paul school officials outlined proposals to cut 110 full-time equivalent teaching positions, which would increase the number of schools with classes housing more than one grade level. The proposal also includes the closure of two early childhood education centers and the elimination of nutrition service workers.

Responsibility for blocking a struggle against these attacks fully rests with the SPFE officialdom, which was well aware that brutal cuts were being prepared.

Following seven months working without a contract, the SPFE rammed

through a contract on March 13, isolating SPPS and MPS teachers from each other. Following an overwhelming strike vote, the SPFE and SPPS swiftly produced a tentative agreement before the strike began and gave teachers less than a week to vote for it, revealing only 25 pages of “highlights” in a carefully monitored Zoom meeting. The deal was hailed by both the Superintendent Joe Gothard and Democratic Party St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter. While SPFE hailed it as a “step forward,” the deal included wage increases that failed to make up for years of high inflation and pay stagnation, while at the same time raising health insurance costs.

Neither the MFT nor the SPFE called on rank-and-file teachers to unite and mobilize workers throughout the region to secure their common interests. On the contrary, they have carried out a deliberate strategy on behalf of the Democratic Party to weaken teachers and force through the demands of its corporate and financial backers.

The disastrous situation educators in the Twin Cities face today was enabled by the sellout of the 2022 Minneapolis teachers strike by the MFT and the national teachers union bureaucracies.

In 2022, educators in both cities were determined to win wage increases above 20 percent, but through the combined conduct of the SPFE and the MFT unions, workers were isolated in Minneapolis to face the MPS without Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) educators on strike. Ultimately, educators got measly 2 and 3 percent raises, far below the decades-high inflation which followed.

This is the same strategy the MFT and SPFE are currently pursuing. During the first seven months of working without a contract, neither the MFT nor the SPFE called a strike vote. Instead of turning to the overwhelming support of the parents, students and the working class, they held various impotent stunts, such as “Walkout Wednesdays,” in an effort to contain opposition to the planned budget cuts.

The unions have kept educators on the job as they are preparing a strategy to push through the demands of the SPPS and MPS, which are effectively run by the Democratic Party. Instead of uniting both Saint Paul and Minneapolis educators, the MFT is engaged in futile appeals to the MPS board, and behind them, local and state Democratic politicians. “It is time that Governor Walz, Speaker Hortman, and Senate Majority Leader Erin Murphy do increase their budget targets for education in the state of Minnesota,” the MFT said at a press conference Tuesday.

But this same Democratic Party is responsible for decades of attacks on public education. Far from expanding funding in schools, it is aggressively pushing for increased military spending at the expense of public education as it prepares to intensify the imperialist war abroad, in the genocide in Gaza and the war against Russia in Ukraine. The Biden administration has sent hundreds of millions of dollars worth of bombs and other military supplies to aid Israel in its genocide against the Palestinians since last fall, with the support of both parties in Congress, and recently signed a record military budget totalling nearly \$1 trillion.

There is nothing “necessary” or inevitable about the budget cuts facing educators in the Twin Cities. Educators should reject the claims that there is not enough money.

For there to be a real fight, however, it is necessary for teachers and school workers to seize the initiative. Rank-and-file committees must be organized in every school and should draw up lists of demands based on what is actually needed, including inflation-busting wage increases and a massive expansion of funding in schools. Such demands, however, require a political strategy and perspective independent of both corporate-controlled parties and all their appendages, so that the needs of the working class—not private profit interests—determine how society’s resources are organized.



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