

# Teachers strike 3 districts on Massachusetts' North Shore

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*Massachusetts teachers: Tell us what you're fighting for by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

Teachers' strikes have begun in three districts on the North Shore of Massachusetts. Strikes began Friday, November 8, by about 800 educators in Beverly and 1,000 in Gloucester. Five hundred Marblehead teachers are set to strike beginning Tuesday, November 12.

Teachers in the three districts, who are members of affiliates of the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) and the National Education Association (NEA), voted overwhelmingly for strike action after working without contracts for at least two months.

Students and parents have been very supportive of the strikes, with high school students staging walkouts and community members joining picket lines. Gloucester and Marblehead high school students walked out of classes Thursday to demonstrate their support. On Friday, 120 teachers and parents picketed Beverly Middle School.

The action by educators is indicative of a mood of defiance over the slashing of school budgets and the attempt by localities to impose their budget shortfalls on the backs of teachers through dwindling wages in the face of inflation, along with cutting vital school services for students.

The state has issued injunctions, ordering teachers back to work in Beverly and Gloucester, with contempt hearings scheduled and fines threatened if educators do not return to their classrooms. Reactionary Massachusetts laws ban public sector strikes, and the teachers' actions have been condemned as illegal. The Newton Teachers Association was fined nearly \$1 million for an 11-day strike by teachers in Newton, west of Boston, earlier this year.

These attacks on education will only intensify under Trump, who has vowed to eliminate the federal Department of Education and support efforts to privatize

the K-12 public school system.

Educators in the districts on strike have been working without a contract since at least August 31. Issues driving the strikes include teacher pay, better parental and bereavement benefits, and more say in school safety procedures. Increased pay for vastly underpaid paraprofessionals, who are vital for the functioning of classrooms, is a major issue.

Discussions between the three unions and school committees continued throughout the weekend and Veterans Day holiday with no agreement. According to reports, the union and School Committee in Marblehead are \$4.6 million apart in salary proposals for the next four years.

A collective bargaining statement issued October 10 by Mayor Michael Cahill said Beverly paraprofessionals were being offered an immediate \$4,000 to \$6,000 "market adjustment" plus 3 percent, 4 percent and 3.35 percent over three years. He said this would bring paraprofessionals' hourly wages to \$25.66–\$33.94 per hour, still far below a living wage.

Beverly teachers were offered a raise of between \$11,262 and \$21,590, which amounts to a pay raise of between just 13.4 and 29.2 percent over three years, far below the rate of inflation. The BTA is also asking for 12 weeks of paid parental leave, limits on high school class sizes and longer lunch and recess times for students in kindergarten through fifth grade, which was not addressed by Cahill's statement.

The Union of Gloucester Educators has criticized the School Committee and Mayor Greg Verga for not bargaining with urgency. Teachers have been without a contract since the start of this school year. Paraprofessionals have been without a contract for 496 days. The Gloucester union said members are asking for 10.5 weeks of paid parental leave, 10 more minutes of preparation time and a "living wage" for

paraprofessionals.

Hundreds of teachers and paraprofessionals from the three striking school districts, joined by parents and supporters, held a “solidarity rally” Monday at Stage Fort Park in Gloucester.

Jordan Ciaramitaro, an educator from Beverly, said the biggest issues in the strike are “parental leave, paraprofessional wages, those are two big ones, and recess, lunch times. They have recess, but it’s not enough. So, at the elementary level, we’ve got 20 minutes, which definitely isn’t an adequate time, to get the movement out of them and be ready to learn.”

Asked how she felt about the attitude of the city administrations and school committees, she said, “It’s a great question. I’m not sure, but we’re lucky to work in a community where our parents are behind us, so that’s really, really nice, and we’re definitely a strong unit ourselves, so it’s nice to have that support and the support of everyone else here.”

Beverly Teachers Association (BTA) members are asking for higher starting salaries for paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals in the city’s schools currently start at \$20,000 a year, with the workers calling for more than double that to \$41,217.

Janna Dwyer, a middle school counselor from Beverly, said, “Our paraprofessional starting salary right now is \$20,000 for 10 months of full-time work. And the proposals from the district are that, in three years, the starting salary for paras would be like \$26,000, and that’s just not acceptable.”

She said the positions for paraprofessionals are not fully filled “because we know no one wants to do such a hard job for that pay.”

Janna added, “And then our current parental leave policy is that we can use our own accrued sick time, our own sick days, for up to eight weeks from the day that the child is born.”

Pointing to her son, she said, “When I had him on June 15, I could use six days. And then in September, when I felt I needed more time with my child, I had to take time unpaid, which I’m very privileged to be able to do that, and not everyone can. The district is offering two paid weeks, and then we could use our own accrued sick time for up to 10 weeks. But you have to work many years to accrue that much time.”

Janna said that mandated parental leave is “only for private businesses. So every municipality had the option of opting into that. And 100 percent of towns and cities in

Massachusetts opted out.

“We want a living wage for paras. We want humane policies for parental leave. And you know what they’re proposing right now, it’s not going to cut it.”

The vast majority of Massachusetts educators are unable to buy a home in the towns where they live. Home prices have soared, with the median sale price for a home in the state rising to \$595,700 in April 2024, a 9.9 percent increase compared to April 2023.

Home prices on the North Shore are generally above this figure. Median home prices in the districts where teachers are striking stand at \$697,500 in Beverly, \$874,500 in Gloucester, and \$1.5 million in Marblehead.

Jana Harris, a paraprofessional at Beverly Middle School, commented about the cost of living facing paraprofessionals. “It’s huge, I think, for all the districts on the North Shore in Massachusetts—Gloucester, Beverly and now Marblehead, because most paras are completely underpaid, they don’t make the living wage. Even if you would double their pay, it would still not be enough to survive on the North Shore.

“So we’re expected to work here, but you don’t really have enough money to live here, right? And we’re constantly being pulled because there are just not enough people in the schools. So, I should be in the class helping out the kids on an IEP [Individualized Education Program].”

She added, “We’re still educators, and we help kids, and we have the relationship with the kids, right? And if we’re not in the classroom ... the kids come to me asking, ‘Where are you? When are you coming back? I need your help.’ And then they can get very easily distraught, because they build a relationship with you, and then suddenly you’re not there, and they feel kind of betrayed and confused.”

Discussing the prospect of more cuts to education under the new Trump administration, Jana said, “Every society has to contribute to education, right? It costs every society money, but that’s your future. If you don’t put money into your future, then what do you expect?”



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