

North Shore Massachusetts strikes end with educators' demands unmet

T.J. Garrison
1 December 2024

Massachusetts teachers: Fill out the form below to learn more about founding a rank-and-file committee.

Teachers strikes in three school districts on Massachusetts' North Shore ended last week with each of the local unions agreeing to contracts with their respective cities that addressed none of the strikers' main concerns. Educators in the three districts had demanded substantial pay raises for teachers, a living wage for paraprofessionals and better working conditions, including longer parental leaves.

On November 8, 800 educators in Beverly and 1,000 in Gloucester began their strikes, followed by 500 Marblehead teachers on November 12. Gloucester educators struck over the course of 10 school days; Marblehead educators struck for 11 school days; and Beverly educators struck for 12 school days. The latter action surpassed Newton's 11-day walkout in January as the state's longest teachers strike in decades.

After over two weeks on strike, with state officials using anti-strike legislation to impose growing fines on the unions and the holidays approaching, educators in Gloucester, Marblehead and Beverly were pressured into voting for deals that left teachers with below-inflation pay raises and paraprofessionals with wages far below living wages.

The Gloucester educators settled on Friday, November 22, and were back at work beginning Monday last week. Beverly and Marblehead educators both settled Tuesday evening, November 26, and were back to work on Wednesday. The unions in the three districts are affiliated with the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) and the National Education Association (NEA).

After working without a contract for months, educators voted overwhelmingly to authorize strikes in all three districts and were prepared to fight. The outcome could have been different if the state's anti-strike campaign was answered with a full mobilization of educators throughout the state and beyond.

But instead, the MTA and NEA bureaucrats did nothing to mobilize their 17,000 members in Massachusetts, let alone the more than 3 million NEA members nationwide. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) bureaucracy did likewise even though its 10,000 members in the Boston Teachers Union are facing their own contract struggle.

Under these conditions, the Gloucester Teachers Association (GTA) forced a settlement on the educators, while Beverly and Marblehead remained on strike, weakening educators in the remaining two districts.

Once Gloucester caved in, union officials in Beverly and Marblehead attempted to quickly reach settlements. Despite repeatedly presenting concession-laden proposals to school authorities, union officials were unable to reach an immediate

agreement by the end of Sunday, November 24, which an Essex County judge had imposed as a deadline for ending mediation in favor of a state-led "fact-finding" mission. For a time, the school district committees in both cities withdrew from negotiations, relying on the court ruling. The school committee in Beverly told educators they would face a pay loss for all missed days.

The role of the local unions, the MTA and NEA

Beverly union officials went so far as boasting on their Facebook page that their proposal was lower in total costs than the district's own offer on November 24. But the school district committees rebuffed the proposals making it clear they wanted nothing less than teachers returning to the classrooms empty-handed.

The unions, meanwhile, accepted without question the school committees' claims that there was simply not enough resources to raise everyone's living standards. Because of this, they insisted that teachers should sacrifice their raises to gain more pay for paraprofessionals. In the end, both teachers and paraprofessionals saw increases that were substantially less than what they had demanded at the outset of the strikes.

Strikes by public sector employees, including educators, are illegal in Massachusetts. Democratic state officials intervened in all three strikes, imposing over \$2.2 million in combined fines, which began at \$50,000 for the first day of each strike and were increased by an additional \$10,000 for every day on strike. All three unions cited the fines as a justification for settling. In their settlement, Marblehead teachers outrageously agreed to forgo retroactive raises to pay back the city for costs incurred during the strike.

The North Shore strikes are the latest in an upsurge of teachers strikes in Massachusetts since 2019, which followed 12 years without a single strike. Since then, strikes have broken out in Dedham, Sharon, Andover, Brookline, Haverhill, Malden, Woburn and Newton.

Tens of thousands of educators are currently working without contracts in Massachusetts, including 10,000 members of the AFT-affiliated Boston Teachers Union.

By the end of their new contracts (in 2027, for Beverly educators, and 2028 for Gloucester and Marblehead) both teachers and paraprofessionals will face worse conditions than when the strike began. Teachers in Gloucester will receive a total wage increase of 15.8 percent by 2028. Beverly teachers will see a 15.4 percent increase by 2027, and Marblehead teachers will see an increase of just

10.9 percent by 2028.

In Gloucester, new paraprofessionals will only see a starting wage of \$30,236 in 2028, up from the current \$22,016. In Beverly the starting wage will be \$33,576 by 2027. In Marblehead, paraprofessionals had to essentially accept the district's initial \$16.65-an-hour proposal for the last year of the contract, with their 2028 starting wage being just 42 cents an hour more than that offer—at \$17.07 an hour—and reaching that point over four years instead of three. The unions had initially asked for totally inadequate starting salaries, with the Beverly union asking for \$41,217 by 2027, Gloucester \$37,142 by 2028 and Marblehead \$30,000 by 2028. All three deals fell significantly short of even these proposals.

Due to Massachusetts laws, paraprofessionals can be paid less than the minimum wage, which is currently \$15 an hour in Massachusetts. The pay rise falls well short of a living wage in all three districts, with top paid paraprofessionals' wages in Gloucester, for example, increasing from the current low level of \$26,155 to just \$36,600 in 2028.

A major goal of teachers had been winning improved parental leave, which is essential for parents to recover from birth, take care of a newborn and bond with their child, while still being able to pay the bills. The unions in the three districts initially asked for at least eight weeks of paid leave.

But each deal fell well short, meaning teachers will continue to have to draw from their yearly sick pay or go without during this period. Gloucester ended up with "the equivalent" of seven weeks of paid leave, without the union specifying whether this was fully paid or partially paid. The union initially asked for eight weeks fully paid and up to a further four weeks partially paid.

In Beverly, the union agreed to only three weeks of paid parental leave. In Marblehead, the outcome is even worse, with the union agreeing to only 15 days of paid leave.

The intransigence of the school committees and city and state officials in Beverly and Marblehead should be taken as a warning to all educators. The aim of school districts across the state, many of them controlled by the Democratic Party, is the gutting of public education and the destruction of the pay and working conditions of educators. The alternative strategy is for workers to wage a unified, widespread and rank and file-driven struggle to overcome the attacks of the ruling class and defend education and good-paying jobs.

Educators cannot allow their struggles to be narrowed to one after another local fight that is isolated from the broader struggles of the working class. Educators must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the NEA and AFT bureaucracies at the local, state and national levels to expand the fight to defend public education.

The NEA and AFT officials have isolated one strike after another and posted nothing on their social media pages or official web sites about the struggle of North Shore educators and the fines imposed by the Democrats.

Instead, local MTA union leaders sought out an audience with Democratic Governor Maura Healey during the strikes, appealing to her to visit the local districts and support educators. Instead, Healey rebuffed the union and called Sunday, November 24, for schools to reopen in Beverly and Marblehead regardless of whether or not agreements were in place.

The Gloucester union hailed the agreement as "historic," and the other two unions also claimed huge victories. Such claims can only undermine educators in the face of the full-scale attack on public education being planned by the incoming Trump administration.

Solely concerned with maintaining their "seats at the table" and dues income, NEA and the AFT leaders have signaled their willingness to work with Trump. NEA President Becky Pringle declared ludicrously in a statement on November 6, "[A]s educators, we will continue to remind [Trump] that the government of the United States and those elected to office have a responsibility to serve all people."

Trump has chosen multibillionaire wrestling executive Linda McMahon to head the Department of Education with the aim of destroying the nearly half-century-old federal agency. Trump's goal is to both heavily privatize education and purge it of meaningful instruction, while subordinating education to his desire to instill "patriotic" vocational and religious teaching, at the lowest possible cost. His mission to dismantle public education as a social right is shared by wider sections of the super-rich, who see it largely as an unacceptable drain on their profits.

The Democratic Party ran the most right-wing, warmongering and pro-business presidential campaign of its history, paving the way for the victory of Trump. Now Democratic leaders are laying out the red carpet for Trump, promising to work with his administration and to ensure a "smooth transition" to Trump's fascist regime of mass deportations, class war and dictatorship.

An industrial and political counteroffensive of the working class must be prepared to oppose Trump's class war policies at home and expansion of wars abroad. The prerequisite for such a struggle is the building of rank-and-file committees to transfer decision-making and power from the union bureaucracies to educators and other school employees.

This is inseparable from the building of a new political movement of the working class against both capitalist parties and for socialism. Only by taking political power in its own hands can workers put an end to social inequality and use society's resources to guarantee the right to high-quality public education and a future for all young people.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

Trump's planned assault on public education