

Thousands of teachers across state without contracts, as Michigan Education Association blocks strike action

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The Michigan school year opened with teachers returning to the classrooms without a labor agreement in multiple districts—including Grand Rapids, Pontiac, Clintondale, Utica, Kalamazoo, Ludington, Walled Lake, Waterford, Howell, Brighton, Ortonville, Farwell, Milan, Northville and Birmingham. In Pontiac and Clintondale, both economically devastated areas, educators have entered their second consecutive year under expired contracts.

Education funding in the state has never recovered from the withdrawal of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding by the Biden-Harris administration. The loss of pandemic relief funds has been compounded by inflation and increases in poverty, and the Trump administration's cuts to federal school funding.

This year, Trump's budget cuts cost Michigan's education system \$81.6 million and were accompanied by a chaotic freeze and partial unfreeze of approximately \$171 million in federal aid. The proposed federal budget, due October 1, threatens to significantly accelerate these attacks. On the state level, Michigan House Republicans are pushing for a \$1.4 billion budget cut to education in a transparent "shell game" that shifts money from the School Aid Fund into road construction.

Despite this coordinated attack on public education, the leaders of the 120,000-member Michigan Education Association (MEA) have not called a single strike vote in any of these districts, let alone mobilized educators for statewide action to stop the underfunding of public education.

Teachers looking to defend their jobs, livelihoods, the right to public education and democratic rights should lose no time in forming independent rank-and-file committees. These committees should immediately restore the trusted maxim: "No contract, no work." They must also oversee all negotiations and contracts, stripping power from the union bureaucracy, which is blocking a struggle and allowing corporate and financial business interests to dictate terms.

Educators are clearly looking for ways to fight:

On Monday, September 8, hundreds of teachers, parents and students rallied at the **Grand Rapids Public Schools** board meeting in support of the fight for a decent contract. "We're the least paid in the district working in some of the most challenging environments," said Whitley Morse, a teacher in Ottawa Hills

High School.

The district's teachers have rejected a Board proposal offering only a 4.5 percent increase—less than half what would be needed to reach parity with peers in neighboring districts and inadequate to make up for years of inflation.

Lisa Lee, an early childhood special education teacher at Buchanan Elementary, described the district's proposal as a "gut punch." "That is not a 4.5 percent (increase) on every teacher salary," she said to *MLive*. With 30 years of experience and a master's degree, plus a salary schedule that Lee said didn't previously guarantee raises each year, she said, "I will be making less next year on your proposed salary (plan). I go backwards. I don't get an increase."

Grand Rapids has Michigan's worst five-year retention rate for teachers, with the pay gap fueling record resignations. Under the Reimagine Grand Rapids Public Schools Facility Plan, 10 schools are closing by 2029.

In **Pontiac**, teachers went back to work for the second year in a row without a contract. On August 28, between 100-200 teachers demonstrated their willingness to fight by staging a walkout during the district's opening convocation, carrying protest signs and marching in silence as administrators spoke.

Pontiac administrators are also pushing for a sweeping restructuring under "Pontiac Schools Reimagined," in league with consultant Donald Weatherspoon. The latter is infamous for destroying the Muskegon Heights Public Schools, firing all the teachers and charterizing the district. The Pontiac plan would close schools, break up elementary communities by grouping grades into separate buildings, and forcibly relocate honors and language immersion programs.

Teachers emphasize that decision-making has been taken out of public view, with last-minute proposals set for board votes before families or staff can respond. Meanwhile, district management has expanded—Pontiac pays two superintendents and multiple consultants over \$600,000 this year, even as educators are told "there's no money" for classroom staff.

Teachers in **Clintondale** are going into the second year without a contract. Since 2023, over two-thirds of its certified staff have resigned or retired as negotiations stall and contract talks extend into another year. In a statement which condemns the MEA as open tool of management and budget-cutting, Mike Ward, the

current president of the Clintondale Education Association, admitted, “For 19 years we’ve only had two years without a concession. For 17, when the district needed concessions the most, these people gave 6% back, gave 4% back; they didn’t move along the salary schedule.”

Currently, teachers report there have been 250 days of “fruitless” bargaining, with district officials refusing to engage in genuine discussions. Special education has been decimated, and entire departments depleted. The union has filed unfair labor practice charges, organized a letter-writing campaign and a “walk-in,” but has never called for a strike vote in nearly two decades.

It is not much different in the “wealthier” districts of **Northville** and **Birmingham**, where teachers are also working without a contract. The administrations are citing budget uncertainty for their refusal to commit to basic salary improvements or classroom standards.

On August 26, Birmingham teachers protested outside Groves High School with “working without a contract” signs in an informational picket. Talks remain deadlocked, with bargaining focused on pay and the district citing state budget uncertainty and “cuts at the federal level” for its position.

After negotiations that began last winter failed, 450 Northville educators have been working without a contract. They are battling stagnant pay and calling for reasonable class sizes. The union leadership, instead of mobilizing broad support for educators, noted they did not want to “bargain in public,” but said they are requesting a 3 percent wage increase and “competitive compensation.”

Teachers are also demanding the return of placement and recall rights, along with just-cause discipline language—rights taken away from educators more than ten years ago under Governor Rick Snyder. Without a contract, teachers are also stuck on the salary schedule, and those who recently earned additional credentials will not see a raise.

Enough is enough! These issues facing educators across Michigan are universal and existential: Will public education survive? Educators have seen decades of cuts to schools and staff, imposed by both Democrats and Republicans.

The union apparatuses issue inadequate demands, accept endless concessions, and systematically block efforts to unite the workforce for action. The National Education Association (parent organization of the MEA) and the American Federation of Teachers covered up for Biden and Harris when they allowed ESSER funds to expire.

Now, under the Trump administration, the AFT, NEA and their state and local affiliates have done nothing to mobilize workers against the virtual elimination of the Department of Education, plans for universal vouchers, and a systematic attack on all aspects school funding. This has gone along with censorship in schools, political litmus tests for teachers in some states, and the promotion of religious indoctrination.

Such complicity emboldens Trump and the financial elite for whom he speaks. It is also a warning. There is already a bipartisan consensus among the Democrats and Republicans, and the oligarchs they serve, that trillions will be cut from schools through various means (vouchers, charters, grants eliminated, programs

consolidated, Title I and IDEA turned into block grants, etc.). The wealthy will receive the best education money can buy, while the working class will be prepared for careers or the military. The beneficiaries will be Wall Street and the military budget.

Knowing these policies will provoke mass opposition, the Trump administration is deploying military troops to major American cities. While the first targets of these dictatorial measures have been immigrant workers and their supporters, the same repressive methods will be employed against strikes, protests and the whole working class.

The NEA and AFT officials have demonstrated they will not fight. Like their allies in the Democratic Party, the union bureaucrats fear nothing more than a mass movement of the working class against Trump, which could quickly escape their control. Their chief concern is keeping their “seats at the table” and legal right to collect dues and enrich themselves.

This is why the Educators Rank-and-File Committee calls for the abolition of the bureaucracy and the transfer of power and decision making from the union apparatus to classroom teachers and other school workers. The defense of public education, won over centuries of struggle, requires militant action, independent of both parties of big business, as part of the mobilization of the international working class against dictatorship, austerity and war.

The Educators Rank-and-File Committee, which is affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, calls on educators to fight for the following demands:

- No contract, no work. Rank-and-file control of negotiations. Full tentative contracts must be made available to the workforce with time to study them before a vote.
- Large wage increases to bring teachers up to the pay scale of similar professional workers. Protect healthcare and pensions.
- Full funding for schools. Full funding for special education. No cuts, school closures or privatization. Maintain all course offerings and programs and expand cultural enrichments. Expropriate the billionaires and redirect billions to education, healthcare and social needs.
- Defend immigrant families. End deportations. No National Guard occupying our cities.
- Build the Educators Rank-and-File Committee and prepare for a general strike against the destruction of social and democratic rights.

Fill out the form below to join this fight.



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