

Ann Arbor, Michigan educators working under expired contract amid massive cuts

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Nearly 2,000 teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff in Ann Arbor Public Schools (AAPS) are working under an expired contract, confronting a district administration that has weaponized a manufactured fiscal crisis to impose a regime of permanent austerity. Negotiations, which formally recommenced on January 26, are unfolding against the backdrop of a global capitalist breakdown, the relentless diversion of social resources toward imperialist war, and the systematic suppression of the working class by the trade union bureaucracy.

The Ann Arbor Education Association (AAEA), led by President Fred Klein, allowed the previous contract to expire on December 31 without a fight, effectively demobilizing the membership. While Superintendent Jazz Parks and the Board of Education claim “good faith” in bargaining, their objective remains the same: ensuring a 15 percent fund balance (approximately \$45 million) to satisfy credit rating agencies and state overseers at the expense of educational quality and workers’ livelihoods.

The 2024 manufactured crisis

This impasse is a consequence of the events of 2024, which served as a form of “shock therapy” for the district. The revelation of a \$25 million budget deficit in March 2024 was a calculated political maneuver designed to reset the baseline of public education in Ann Arbor.

The crisis was initiated with the sensational claim of a \$14 million “accounting error.” District officials cited a clerical mistake regarding pension liabilities and a one-time infusion of state funds to create an atmosphere of emergency to whip up a crisis atmosphere.

However, the subsequent independent review by Plante Moran, released in June 2024, exposed this narrative as fundamentally misleading. The review explained that the “\$14 million accounting error” was actually a “recording

error” that had no impact on the district’s actual fund balance or the shortfall itself. The true drivers of the deficit were structural: the expiration of federal COVID-19 relief funds (ESSER)—a “fiscal cliff” created by the Biden administration—combined with declining enrollment and rising inflationary pressures.

The cuts implemented in 2024 were savage. The AAPS Board voted 6-1 to slash \$20.4 million, eliminating 141 positions, including 91 teachers. These cuts struck at the heart of the educational experience:

- The elementary world language program was gutted to save \$400,000.
- STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) programming was downgraded to save \$1.2 million.
- Co-teacher support for music programs was eliminated, saving \$224,000.
- The middle school pools were closed to save \$520,000

Due to cuts, support staff are working in converted custodian closets without ventilation or running water. Instrumental music classes are held in storage rooms reaching 85° F (29° C), and special needs students have been moved into spaces lacking appropriate facilities.

The Treachery of the Union Bureaucracy

These cuts would not have been possible without the active collaboration of the AAEA and the Michigan Education Association (MEA). Far from organizing a fightback, the union bureaucracy served as a dampener on rank-and-file militancy.

From the onset of the 2024 crisis, AAEA President Fred Klein adopted a posture of surrender. He explicitly endorsed the district’s goal of reducing staff, arguing only about the method: “The district should use attrition and retirements to continue to reduce staff and right-size the district,” Klein declared. The union apparatus actively worked to suppress

independent action, warning teachers against allowing “frustration and anger” to lead them to “turn against” the district.

On February 4, Klein announced that some teachers were suspending certain non-contractual duties—pulling back on out-of-classroom tasks such as voluntary supervision and extracurricular coaching—as a pressure tactic. The limited suspension of voluntary work was designed to create the appearance of militancy while keeping control of escalation; it does not substitute for preparation for strike action and can be withdrawn on the bureaucrats’ timetable.

The Democratic Party and the “Arsenal of Democracy”

The claim of “no money” is a lie. The austerity in AAPS is a direct result of the allocation of social wealth by the Democratic Party, which controls every lever of power in Michigan. The starving of public education is the necessary corollary to the feeding of the war machine and corporate coffers.

Governor Gretchen Whitmer has presided over a massive transfer of public funds to private corporations. While AAPS was cutting \$400,000 from world languages, the state was handing out billions:

- General Motors: Secured \$2.28 billion in tax savings through 2029.
- Ford Motor Company: Received over \$630 million for its Blue Oval Battery Park.
- SOAR Fund: The Strategic Outreach and Reserve (SOAR) fund allocates \$500 million annually to attract businesses.

Whitmer has invoked the World War II slogan “Arsenal of Democracy” to describe her vision for Michigan’s future. This involves the direct mobilization of industrial and research capacity for war against Russia and China. Michigan is now home to nearly 5,000 defense contractors generating \$30 billion in economic activity.

The University of Michigan (U-M), located blocks from AAPS, exemplifies this subordination of science to war. In Fiscal Year 2025, U-M received \$100 million in direct research support from the Department of Defense. Key projects include \$7.5 million for heat-tolerant semiconductors for military vehicles and \$15 million for AI-driven “game theory” with autonomous agents. While the university develops technology to incinerate human beings abroad, the public schools in its shadow cannot afford to teach children a second language.

The Global Context and the Way Forward

The struggle in Ann Arbor is part of an international wave of resistance. At the end of January, 35,000 Los Angeles teachers voted to authorize a strike against concessionary healthcare deals, and teachers in San Francisco are prepared to strike this Monday. In the UK, educators are striking against “compulsory redundancies” and privatization. In December, more than 35,000 New Zealand primary teachers rejected a sellout pay deal, a clear rebuke to the union bureaucracy and the government’s austerity agenda.

The experience of the last two years has shown that the AAEA and MEA bureaucracy will not lead a fight. To break the deadlock, educators, parents, and students must organize themselves from below, to take initiative out of their hands. Teachers should select a rank-and-file committee, consisting of their most trusted coworkers, to plan strategy and prepare action, in alliance with teachers across the state and the country.

This committee must affiliate with the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee (MERFC) and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which is fighting for a working class defense of public education all over the world.

Educators must demand an immediate wage increase to effectively compensate for years of accumulated inflation and wage stagnation. This economic reset must be accompanied by the full restoration of all recent cuts, specifically the reinstatement of the 141 positions eliminated in 2024 and the return of all discontinued programs.

To finance these necessities, educators must call for the abolition of the “fund balance” hoard, demanding that these reserves be spent directly on students rather than preserved to satisfy bondholders. Finally, teachers, paraprofessionals and staff must demand an end to the war economy, insisting that the billions currently squandered on corporate subsidies and U-M military research be redirected toward the vital needs of public education.

The struggle for a contract in Ann Arbor is a struggle against the Biden-Trump consensus of austerity and war. It requires the industrial mobilization of the working class in a general political strike to break the power of the corporate oligarchy.



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