

# Ann Arbor teachers vote 1,084-4 to defeat sellout contract as teachers across Michigan face layoffs and poverty pay

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*Build a movement against sellouts. Fill out the form below for help building a rank-and-file committee at your school.*

Last week, members of the Ann Arbor Education Association (AAEA) voted 1,084 to 4 (99.6 percent) to reject a tentative contract the union's bargaining team had signed after months of state-mediated negotiations. With 97 percent of the membership turning out, the vote was not a protest. It was a verdict.

The proposed contract offered teachers a 1.5 percent raise for this year and next—in a city where housing costs are among the highest in Michigan and inflation is running at 4.7 percent. Additionally, the district demanded class size increases of three students at every grade level, raising high school classes to 36, along with an 18 percent cut in elementary planning time and the elimination of art and music programs. The district also wants a hard cap on health insurance contributions that would, by design, keep the district's payments below the floor a pending state bill would legally require—locking teachers out of the limited protections they are about to gain.

Teachers exploded in anger on Reddit. One noted that many classes already exceed the proposed limits: “Some of the classes at Pioneer have 38 in them. They wanted to have 45 in the AP Calc BC classes until parents threw a fit in August.”

Another teacher cut to the core of what is at stake:

Administrators currently pay one-eighth of what teachers pay for the exact same health care coverage. One-eighth. Teachers' premiums have increased by thousands of dollars in back-to-back years. [District Superintendent] Jazz Parks can write all the bland, corporate press releases she wants but it won't stop the fact that the room is on fire.

Parks—who received a pay package of \$454,223 in 2024—characterized the offer as “a genuine, good-faith effort.” The irony was not lost on educators—a 36-year classroom veteran replied that their biggest raise in two decades had been “a 2.5 percent raise in 2006.”

A parent summed up the community's fury: “What is it going to take? They've had TWO YEARS since the last self-inflicted budget crisis to figure this out. It's all about PR, not actual transparency and accountability.”

Ann Arbor is not alone. When Michigan's 2025 school year opened, teachers in more than fifteen districts were told to return to work

without a contract—including Grand Rapids, Pontiac, Clinton Township, Utica, Kalamazoo, Northville, Birmingham, Walled Lake, Waterford and Brighton. Far from upholding the principle of “no contract, no work,” the unions in every one of these districts (all National Education Association-affiliated, like Ann Arbor) enforced management's work order.

As of this week, Pontiac teachers have worked 301 days without a contract. In order to coverup their own complicity, officials from the Pontiac Education Association filed an unfair labor practice charge in December and held a no-confidence vote against district leadership in February. When talks resumed, teachers were offered two pennies per hour. One paraprofessional described the reality: “Two pennies equals \$11 over a year. Would that help you and your family out? I leave here most days and I'll DoorDash for a couple of hours.”

In Clintondale, NEA-affiliated teachers are entering their second consecutive year without a contract. Since 2023, over two-thirds of certified staff—75 of 115 professionals—have resigned or retired.

In Grand Rapids, Michigan's eighth-largest district, the board voted to close 10 schools by 2029 while teachers remain the lowest-paid in Kent County, with the worst five-year retention rate of comparable districts. A parallel restructuring scheme in Pontiac was developed by a consultant notorious for destroying Muskegon Heights Public Schools—firing all teachers and converting the district to charter management.

Across the state, the share of district budgets devoted to teacher compensation has fallen from 82 percent in 2004 to 75 percent today. The Michigan Education Association's approximately 117,000 active members and the American Federation of Teachers-Michigan's 35,000 members have watched their leadership stall contracts, advance concessionary agreements and block any serious mobilization.

In Ann Arbor, the union signed the rotten tentative agreement not as part of a fighting strategy, but to manage and suppress educator anger. Nationally, the NEA and AFT partnered to shut down the Los Angeles school workers' strike of 80,000 workers and impose an austerity contract in the nation's second-largest district. In San Francisco, a four-day strike was shut down with a settlement offering 2 percent annual raises, followed by immediate layoffs.

NEA President Betsy Pringle's 2024-2025 pay package was \$514,755—more than that of Jazz Parks. The union bureaucracy has more in common with the administrators across the table than with the teachers submitting a 99.6 percent rejection vote.

Remembering the powerful support for a general strike arising out

of the ICE murders in Minneapolis, union bureaucrats fear a strike precisely because it would galvanize teachers and workers everywhere looking for a means to oppose austerity, Trump's threat of dictatorship at home and imperialist war abroad. In other words, union leaders fear a strike not because it might fail but because it might succeed—and threaten their carefully managed relationships with Democratic Party politicians, e.g., their “seat at the table.”

### **A false argument**

In Ann Arbor, administrators and union officials alike claim raising pay requires finding cuts elsewhere in the budget. This is categorically false. America is the richest country in the world and if resources for public education are limited it is only because of the political decisions by Democrats and Republicans to starve the public schools in order to prioritize tax cuts for the wealthy and military spending.

It is worth reviewing some key aspects of the decades-long assault on public education and its bipartisan character.

At the federal level, the Biden administration's American Rescue Plan delivered \$5.6 billion in ESSER relief funds to Michigan schools—then allowed the spending deadline to expire in September 2024 with no replacement revenue. Districts that used those funds for staff and other expenses faced an immediate fiscal cliff. At the same time, the Biden-Harris administration funded the military at \$886 billion in fiscal year 2024.

The Trump administration accelerated the damage. In March 2025, Education Secretary Linda McMahon revoked a previously approved extension allowing Michigan districts to claim \$42 million in pre-approved reimbursements for school safety improvements—effective that same day. In July 2025, the administration withheld \$156 million in Michigan school funding. By year's end, at least \$12 billion in K-12 education funding had been disrupted nationally. Trump's proposed fiscal 2026 budget would cut K-12 grant programs by 70 percent while raising the military budget by 42 percent to \$1.5 trillion!

At the state level, the mechanism is the School Aid Fund (SAF), established in 1955 and fed by the sales tax that Michigan voters raised in 1994 specifically to fund K-12 schools. Beginning in 2010, under Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm, SAF dollars began flowing to higher education. Under Republican Governor Rick Snyder, the diversion was made permanent, paired with a \$1.6 billion corporate tax cut in the same year the per-pupil foundation allowance was cut by \$470.

Governor Gretchen Whitmer, who condemned SAF diversions in 2013 when they totaled \$400 million, proposed a record \$1.7 billion diversion in her 2026 budget. General Motors alone was approved for MEGA tax credits approaching \$3.5 billion; the state has offered more than \$1 billion in incentives each to at least eight corporations since 2021.

The cumulative diversion of School Aid Fund money from K-12 since 2010 now approaches \$9.5 billion. The Michigan League for Public Policy stated the conclusion plainly: “The state is paying for tax cuts with money taken from its K-12 students.”

Charter schools are another conduit for public education dollars to wealthy for-profit interests. Under both Democratic and Republican administrations, charter schools have proliferated in Michigan. Seventy percent are run by for-profits, the highest percentage in the

nation. The cost to public education is now approximately \$1.4 billion per year, as funds are drained from neighborhood schools.

The claim that there is “no money” for teachers is not an accounting fact. It is a political choice—one made consistently, across party lines, over fifteen years, in favor of corporations, military contractors and the financial elite.

Teachers in Ann Arbor, Pontiac, Clintondale, Grand Rapids and dozens of other Michigan districts face the same manufactured crisis, the same empty promises and the same union bureaucracies that have proven unwilling and unable to lead a genuine fight. What unites these teachers is more powerful than what divides them—whether they are MEA members, AFT members or unaffiliated educators.

The 1,084-4 vote in Ann Arbor did not come from the union leadership. It came from the rank and file—educators who have absorbed two decades of declining real wages, exploding healthcare costs, growing class sizes and the slow dismantling of the profession aided and abetted by the labor bureaucracy. That spirit must now be organized, not managed.

What is required is the formation of rank-and-file committees in every district to transfer power and decision making from the union hierarchy to classroom teachers and support staff. These committees can coordinate action across district lines, demand full public accounting of school finances and build a genuine political mobilization of teachers, school workers, parents and the broader working class in defense of public education.

Such committees must make clear that the fight over a teacher's contract in Ann Arbor is inseparable from the fight against school closures in Grand Rapids, poverty contracts in Pontiac and the bipartisan political consensus—from Lansing to Washington—that public education can be starved to fund corporate profits and military spending. It is inseparable, too, from the growing movement of the working class against inequality, austerity and the threat to democratic rights.

The money exists. It is in the SAF transfers, the MEGA tax credits, the Pentagon budget and the pay packages of the executives who tell teachers there is nothing left. Reclaiming it requires a political fight—one waged by an organized, united working class, not by a union apparatus that has already demonstrated where its loyalties lie.



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