

Ann Arbor public school teachers enter sixth month without a new contract

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On June 3, hundreds of Ann Arbor, Michigan teachers and city residents rallied outside the Ann Arbor Public Schools administration building ahead of a Board of Education meeting to demand decent wages and conditions for some 2,000 AAPS employees, who have been working without a new contract for over five months. Ann Arbor Public Schools is in the midst of finalizing its budget for the 2026-27 fiscal year, which begins July 1.

The Ann Arbor Education Association (AAEA), led by President Fred Klein, allowed the previous contract to expire on December 31, 2025 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.

In March of 2024, AAPS announced a \$25 million budget deficit, linking it to an alleged \$14 million “accounting error” related to pension liabilities. This claim was debunked by an independent review, released in June 2024 by Plante Moran, which found that the supposed error had no impact on the balance of funds. The review found that the real drivers were the expiration of federal COVID relief funds, declining enrollment and inflation.

The school district exploited this manufactured crisis to impose a sweeping round of cuts in 2024. The AAPS Board voted 6-1 to slash \$20.4 million from the budget, eliminating 141 positions, including 91 teachers. The cuts gutted the elementary world language program, downgraded STEAM programming, eliminated co-teacher support for music programs, and closed middle school pools. In the aftermath, support staff were relocated to converted custodian closets without ventilation or running water, and instrumental music classes were held in stifling storage rooms, with temperatures reaching 85 degrees Fahrenheit.

It is within this context that the teachers entered contract negotiations. The tentative agreement the AAEA bargaining team produced after months of state-mediated talks offered only a 1.5 percent salary raise for this year and the next. This is an insult to teachers in a city where housing costs are among the highest in Michigan and where inflation has been running at 4.7 percent. The proposal also included class size increases of three students at every grade level, raising high school classes to 36; an 18 percent

cut in elementary planning time; the elimination of art and music programs; and a hard cap on district healthcare contributions designed to keep payments below the floor that a pending state bill would legally require.

The result was a verdict on years of sellouts. On April 27, AAEA members voted to reject the agreement by a staggering 99.6 percent, with some 97 percent of the membership turning out to vote. The vote marked the first rejection of a tentative agreement since 1994, the year Ann Arbor teachers last went on strike. Teachers on social media pointed out that some classes at Pioneer High School already exceed the proposed size limits, with AP Calculus sections running to 38 students. A teacher with 36 years on the job noted that the largest raise in two decades had been a 2.5 percent increase in 2006.

Following the June 3 rally, AAEA President Klein acknowledged that veteran teachers are earning between \$15,000 and \$21,000 less per year than their counterparts in comparable districts. Many Ann Arbor teachers are leaving the district for other districts with better compensation and lower healthcare costs.

The current struggle does not exist in isolation. Ann Arbor is one of more than 15 Michigan school districts where teachers began the 2025–26 school year without a contract. Pontiac teachers have worked over 300 days without a contract; Clintondale teachers are entering their second consecutive year under an expired agreement and more than two-thirds of certified staff have resigned or retired; the Board of Education of Grand Rapids Public Schools, Michigan’s eighth largest district, voted to close 10 schools by 2029, while its teachers remain the lowest-paid in Kent County.

The claim of the Ann Arbor Public Schools district that there is “no money” to meet teachers’ demands is bogus. The cumulative diversion of Michigan’s School Aid Fund, which was established specifically to finance K-12 schools and whose revenue voters approved raising in a 1994 referendum, has exceeded \$9.5 billion since 2010, under both Democratic and Republican administrations. Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, who condemned these diversions in 2013 when they totaled \$400 million, proposed a record \$1.7 billion diversion in her 2026 budget. Meanwhile, General Motors secured \$2.28 billion in state tax savings through 2029, and the state has offered over \$1 billion in incentives to at least eight corporations since 2021.

At the federal level, the Biden administration’s American Rescue Plan delivered \$5.6 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to Michigan schools and

then allowed the program to expire in September 2024 with no replacement revenue. The Trump administration has since withheld \$156 million in Michigan school funding and proposed a 70 percent cut to K-12 grant programs in fiscal year 2026, while simultaneously proposing to raise the military budget by 42 percent to \$1.5 trillion in 2027.

Ann Arbor Public Schools Superintendent Jazz Parks, who received a pay package of \$454,223 in 2024, characterized the rejected tentative agreement as “a genuine, good-faith effort.” National Education Association President Becky Pringle’s own 2024–25 compensation package exceeded \$514,000. The union apparatus has far more in common with the administration sitting across the table than with the teachers it falsely claims to represent.

Bargaining is set to resume June 15 with a state mediator. What is clear is that Ann Arbor educators have absorbed the costs of austerity for years and have now reached a breaking point. They have gone nearly six months without a new contract, rejected the sellout tentative agreement almost unanimously and hundreds protested last Wednesday evening. The question is now whether their anger will be organized into sustained and unified action across district lines and independent of a union apparatus that has already demonstrated where its loyalties lie.

At the June 3 rally, Chelsea Mayer, who works at Mitchell Elementary, a Title I school that serves lower-income students, said:

Working at a Title I school, I feel like sometimes we get lumped in with all of the Ann Arbor schools... People think of Ann Arbor schools as being kind of affluent, having it all together, and that’s just not the case... If we’re not retaining qualified teachers over the long-term, that is detrimental to students first and foremost.

Another teacher said:

I have spent the last 25 years teaching for AAPS. The single line item that makes the schools a shit show is the administrative cabinet. It has always been run in a corporate manner, where people are punished and threatened for speaking their minds. The board rubber stamps anything the superintendent wants. Sitting board members openly demonstrate disdain for teachers. We have so much bloat at the top. There are people working there making two teachers’ salaries that have little to no impact on the classroom. They are so detached from real teaching exposure that they are completely out of touch...

Don’t get me started on the wage theft. Dozens upon dozens of teachers were in the incorrect pay lane for over a decade and the district paid them a fraction of what they were owed. If they accidentally overpay you, they are extremely quick to get their money back. It is time to clean house.

A resident of Ann Arbor said:

I have two kids in AAPS. Neither of them has a full set of permanent teachers. Both of my children have a number of long-term subs that rotate in and out and or student teachers because their regular teachers have quit and not been replaced. I absolutely do not blame the teachers for this situation. The administrators of those schools are also doing their best. But what the hell is the Board and the regular administration doing about this debacle?

In a high-level science class, the teacher is completely unqualified to teach the subject. This student teacher lacks the most basic foundation. The kids are Googling the answers to their questions and finding different information that is correct, and the teacher has to be corrected by them... In the Spanish language class the teacher doesn’t speak the language. She is also a long-term sub...

Now, I see that the school wants to come back to the voters for another capital millage. Who cares about new buildings if there are no teachers left?

What is required to stop the attack on education and the betrayals of the union bureaucrats 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.



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