

Minneapolis, St. Paul teachers file intent to strike

Anthony Bertolt
1 March 2022

Following an overwhelming strike authorization vote by educators in the Twin Cities in Minnesota, the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) Local 59 and the St. Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) Local 28 filed an intent to strike last Wednesday. Walkouts could begin as soon as March 8.

There are over 8,000 educators and support staff in the St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS) and Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) districts. The second and third largest school districts in the state employ roughly 15 percent of the 54,000 teachers in Minnesota.

The strike authorization was filed amidst a surge of teacher and student opposition to the reopening of schools during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Across the country, over 200,000 children have lost a parent or caregiver to COVID-19. Over half of all teachers say they have considered leaving the profession.

Since schools reopened in August last year, total deaths from COVID-19 infections in the US have increased by 50 percent from roughly 600,000 to over 900,000, with the age group experiencing the largest increase in infections occurring in school-age children. The spread of the Omicron variant this year alone has led to the deaths of at least eight teachers and three students in Minnesota.

Given that both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association—the national parent unions of the MFT and SPFE—have fully endorsed the reckless reopening of schools, it is no surprise that Twin Cities teacher unions have studiously avoided any mention of the nationwide resistance to this homicidal policy, including the recent walkouts of Chicago and Oakland teachers and students. Students in SPPS schools also took part in walkouts in solidarity with students and teachers across

the nation against these conditions last month. The Chicago Teachers Union and their counterparts in New York City, Los Angeles and other major urban areas have sabotaged these struggles and fully backed Biden's back-to-school and "let the pandemic rip" policies.

Just three weeks ago, AFT President Randi Weingarten voiced her support for ending mask mandates and any measures intended to curtail the spread of COVID-19 in all K-12 schools. Claiming that masks are "impeding learning [and] socialization," Weingarten upheld the reactionary guidelines from the CDC, which declared that masks were no longer required for vaccinated teachers.

The MFT and SPFE have advanced separate slates of demands, effectively dividing Minneapolis and St. Paul teachers. SPFE proposals ask for SPPS to address limits on class sizes, better mental health support, and meager wage increases of 2.5 percent compared to the 1.5 percent that SPPS is proposing. The current rate of inflation is 7.5 percent, meaning educators would have to absorb a massive cut in real income.

MFT is asking for the minimum pay for education support professionals to be raised from \$24,000 to \$35,000, which would still be barely above the city's poverty level. The union is also calling for a 20 percent raise for teachers, whose salaries have essentially been frozen for the last two decades. When inflation and rising health care costs are factored in, teachers have only gotten a 1 percent raise in the last twenty years, due to concessions backed by the unions.

The MFT also is asking for reduced class sizes, special education caseloads, designated teachers to work with quarantined students, and an increase in mental health services for students to address mental health crises in schools. These demands, however, are

widely seen as symbolic and only a “starting point” in negotiations, which the MFT will quickly retreat from.

Instead of uniting teachers in the Twin Cities, the unions are seeking to divide them, opening up the possibility for separate contract agreements. This is part of the repeated strategy of the unions and the Democratic Party to isolate the struggles of workers. The last teachers’ strike in Minneapolis was in 1970, and before the previous struggle that was ended prematurely by the SPFE in 2020 in St. Paul, the last strike of St. Paul teachers was in 1946.

The two unions, and their pseudo-left supporters, are also promoting racial politics to divide and weaken educators. The MFT, along with MPS, has been pushing a Memorandum of Agreement prioritizing the hiring and firing of teachers based on their skin color since as early as 2019. In addition to the undermining of legislation passed during the Civil Rights movement, which outlawed racial discrimination, this also serves to pit educators against each other based on race, in a fratricidal struggle over a dwindling number of jobs. This is in line with the Democratic Party’s promotion of identity politics as it slashes school budgets, attacks teachers and promotes for-profit charter schools.

Teachers must answer this by taking the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the SPFE and MFT and setting up their own independent rank-and-file committees to put forth their real demands, including the right to remote learning until COVID-19 has been controlled.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact