

Nation magazine, DSA seek to channel Minneapolis teachers strike behind Democratic Party

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With the eruption of the Minneapolis educators strike, a number of self-described “left” publications, such as *Left Voice* and *Jacobin* magazine, have published articles which attempt to (1) present the struggle in primarily racial terms, (2) cover up for the unions’ complicity in enforcing low wages, austerity agreements, and the unsafe reopening of schools during the pandemic, and (3) obscure the role of the Democratic Party in spearheading the assault on public education in recent decades.

Emblematic is a March 8 article in the “left-liberal” *Nation* magazine, “Minneapolis Educators Strike for the Common Good,” by Democratic Socialist of America (DSA) member and *Jacobin* magazine education writer Eric Blanc.

Blanc begins by stating that the pandemic has “pushed public education to a breaking point.” Not once referring in his article to Biden, the Democrats, or the Republicans, for that matter, he presents the catastrophic impact of the pandemic as essentially a nonpolitical phenomenon. Throughout, Blanc presents the situation as though the horrific toll of COVID-19 on workers, as well as low wages, oversized classrooms and underfunded schools, simply materialized out of thin air, the result of unnamed “forces.”

Omitted is the fact that these conditions are the result of policies carried out by the Democratic Party, as well as the Republicans. In relation to the pandemic, the Biden administration and the Democrats—with the crucial support of the teachers unions—have in effect embraced the mass COVID infection, “herd immunity” policy of the Trump administration, abandoning all public health measures that may impinge on corporate profits.

The 2018-2019 teachers’ strike wave

Blanc argues that the teachers’ strikes of 2018-19 were making good “progress,” but were “abruptly checked by the pandemic.” Referring to the 2020 teachers strike in St. Paul, shut down by the St. Paul Federation of Educators with the pandemic cynically cited as justification, he states, “Nowhere was this dynamic clearer than in St. Paul, where teachers and support staff were three days into a strike in March 2020 when Covid-19 forced an end to their action.”

Rewriting history, Blanc conveniently blames the pandemic for the end of the strike wave 2018-2019—glossing over the actual conduct of the unions in working to suppress the rebellion of teachers.

What was the real course of development of the 2018-2019 strikes? In February 2018, teachers began mass wildcats across the former coal counties of southern West Virginia. The walkouts, organized on Facebook

and in discussions among teachers in the schools, arose independently and in defiance of the unions and the politicians. It was not a solely American phenomenon, but part of an international resurgence of the class struggle which included massive struggles by teachers in Bangladesh, Algeria, the United Kingdom, Holland, Amsterdam and more.

The West Virginia teachers expanded the wildcat throughout the state, repeatedly defying the calls of the West Virginia Educators Association and the West Virginia American Federation of Teachers (AFT) to force through rotten compromises and establish “cooling off” periods in alliance with Democrat-turned-Republican Governor Jim Justice. Teachers won wide support among state workers, Frontier telecom workers and the vast majority of the working population.

The DSA and other pseudo-left groups played a critical role in reestablishing the authority of the discredited union over the rebellious workers by promoting illusions in the Democratic Party. After repeated attempts to shut down the powerful movement, AFT President Randi Weingarten and then-National Education Association (NEA) President Lily Garcia personally intervened to force through the betrayal of the strikers’ main demand—full funding for health care. They ended the strike in dirty collusion behind the scenes with Governor Justice and the state legislature.

Teachers walked away with inadequate wage increases which were soon eaten up by the ballooning costs of health care. In an echo of the provocative threats currently being made by the Minneapolis school board—that any significant raises will have to be offset with cuts elsewhere—the wage increases were not paid for through increased taxes on the corporations and super-rich, but rather by slashing public program spending. Additionally, teachers’ demands for the prohibition of charter schools were also given up, paving the way for the growth of privatization in the state. This did not stop Blanc, the DSA, *Jacobin*, et al. from hailing the walkout as a victory.

Mass mobilizations of teachers spread to Arizona, Kentucky, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and beyond. Angry educators later walked out throughout the state of Washington and in Los Angeles and Chicago. But in each case, the AFT and NEA intervened to isolate struggles of educators and force through betrayals. The union officialdom flew from city to city enforcing the austerity which the politicians dictated. The outcome was no different in “red” states or “blue.”

The unions, the DSA and other pseudo-left groups like the Badass Teachers and Arizona Educators United worked in tandem to subordinate teachers to the Democrats under the slogan “Remember in November.” AFT President Randi Weingarten, who also sits on the Democratic National Committee, called for transforming the walkouts “into walk-ins into the voting booth.”

In other words, the strike wave was deliberately sabotaged and turned

into a cynical maneuver for political support to the Democratic Party in the 2018 midterm elections.

In a similar conspiracy, the Arizona Education Association (AEA) and the Arizona Educators United (AEU) Facebook group, led by Rebecca Garelli, worked together to end the April 26-May 3, 2018, strike by 75,000 Arizona teachers. They hailed Republican Governor Doug Ducey's deal to end the strike and claimed teachers could make up the \$700 million shortfall through a mass petition effort called Invest in Ed.

After collecting some 270,000 signatures for the ballot measure, educators saw it unceremoniously struck down by the courts. Just this week, Invest in Ed's tax hikes were permanently blocked. A 2021 report shows Arizona teachers still make the lowest salaries in the nation.

The 2018 wildcat actions were followed by a series of determined strikes by tens of thousands of teachers in Los Angeles, Oakland and Chicago in 2019. In each case, however, the strikes were kept isolated from each other by the teachers unions, with the AFT and NEA refusing to call a national walkout despite widespread support.

What is consistently left out of the distorted appraisal of these struggles by the DSA and Blanc is that the teachers were fighting against deplorable conditions which had previously been agreed to by the unions, whether in West Virginia, Arizona, Los Angeles or Chicago.

It was only because of the enormous anger and discontent which had been building up over these conditions for years among teachers that the unions felt compelled to call limited walkouts, with the aim, however, of reaching agreements within the parameters of the corporate status quo.

The suppression of strikes is the avowed policy of the unions. In the midst of the 2018 walkouts, AFSCME Council 31 argued at the US Supreme Court that "agency fees," a form of dues, were the "tradeoff" for the unions ensuring "no strikes." AFT President Randi Weingarten followed up, warning that the type of "activism" seen in West Virginia would "be multiplied and magnified across the country if collective bargaining is struck down."

The promotion of racist politics

Under these conditions, it is no wonder that Blanc struggles to put a "left" face on the AFT. To that end, he and the pseudo-left have endlessly promoted the racist policies of the Democratic Party.

Blanc's article endorses the race-based narrative, blaming "structural inequities" for the outflow of educators. He approvingly quotes the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) Educational Support Professional Chapter President Shaun Laden, who declared, "The district doesn't treat our members of color and our hourly workers with the dignity and respect that they deserve."

Blanc lines up the union's attempt to pit educators against each other for jobs and wages. In Minneapolis, the MFT has put forward a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which seeks to establish legal preference for "educators of color" under conditions of layoffs, which are expected next year. In other words, instead of conducting a determined struggle against all layoffs and school closures, the union insists that white teachers should be fired first, deliberately dividing school workers in the face of these attacks.

The unions explicitly accept budget cutting and layoffs, wishing only to have a "seat at the table" to determine how such cuts are carried out. As Karen Lewis, the late head of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), put it in 2012, "We understand that whole movement of closing schools and doing it aggressively. The problem is—I guess that's why we're all here—we either do this together in some reasonable way or we will always be fighting."

The MFT seeks to camouflage the union's failures *and* defend education workers with claims it is fighting to correct "systemic racism." The actual content of so-called "social justice" unionism across the US has been to accept austerity for workers, acquiesce in the herding of teachers and students into schools during the pandemic at the risk of their lives, while simultaneously mouthing fictions about "bargaining for the common good."

The claim that the decades-long starvation of the public schools is the product of "racism," not capitalism, is the stock-in-trade of the Democratic Party, which wants to conceal its role in slashing school funding while promoting black capitalist politicians who are just as anti-working class as their white counterparts.

Such divisive policies are deeply reactionary. The MOU's result would be to undermine civil rights, establish racial discrimination as public policy, render seniority rights moot and, above all, stoke divisions among educators, parents and students.

In the 1960s, the United Federation of Teachers (the New York City AFT affiliate) opposed the demands by black nationalists for the firing of white, Jewish teachers as part of their program of "community control." Today, the AFT and its pseudo-left acolytes embrace this deeply reactionary demand.

The Minneapolis school board has repeatedly stressed it is more than happy to promote racial preferences as part of its attempts to supposedly "recruit and retain teachers of color." The joining together of the union and the school authorities on this demand signals that the union will accept further cuts and layoffs, as long as they are done under the cover of racial preferences, which is hideously presented as "social justice."

The DSA and the unions

In concluding, Blanc tries to dampen teachers' determination, the better to assist the union in providing a rationale for pushing a deal on the district's terms. He states that "this will not be an easy strike to win" while failing to address any calls to extend the strike and mobilize the powerful Twin Cities working class. He also covers up for the St. Paul Federation of Educators, which signed a last-minute deal to block joint strike action with Minneapolis teachers.

Blanc creates a ready-made excuse for the MFT, claiming a "reinvigorated right-wing offensive against teacher unions nationwide" will spark community anger which "is sure to rise" if the strike drags on, and may "determine the strike's fate."

Blanc has made somewhat of a name for himself as a phony "socialist" on the education beat, specializing in fabricating "victories" out of the nationwide teachers' strikes of 2018-19.

He is a proponent of a "dirty break" with the Democratic Party, which amounts to supporting Democrats while claiming to oppose them. Similarly talking out of both sides of his mouth, Blanc will offer mild criticisms of certain unions while insisting workers maintain their absolute allegiance to the AFT and NEA.

A shared class basis weds the pseudo-left organizations such as the DSA and the trade unions whose betrayals they unflinchingly apologize for and cover up. Both the DSA and the unions' bureaucratic apparatus are comprised of and oriented to privileged sections of the upper middle class.

Such social layers—including figures such as Randi Weingarten, whose salary exceeds half a million dollars—have grown enormously wealthy on the basis of the frenetic run-up in the stock market during the course of the pandemic. This process of massive inflation in share values has been predicated upon an historic crime against the working class, with

workplaces and schools forced to remain open during a pandemic, killing nearly a million within the US, and close to 20 million throughout the world with excess deaths taken into account.

These material interests have found increasingly naked expression in the articles and statements of the DSA throughout the pandemic, which promoted figures associated with the “herd immunity” Great Barrington Declaration and called for the reopening of schools at the height of the Omicron surge.

The real alternative for Minneapolis teachers

Minneapolis teachers have walked out for the first time in 50 years. They are directly confronting the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (DFL), as the Democratic Party in Minnesota is referred to, under the administrations of Mayor Jacob Frey and Governor Tim Walz. Under long years of DFL control, the schools in the state are under-resourced, with burnt-out and underpaid school workers who are exiting the system in droves.

To win this landmark struggle, Minneapolis educators—who in fact have the support of the majority of parents—must reject the efforts by Blanc and other DSA members to promote the MFT and keep teachers subordinated to its maneuvers with the Democratic Party. The struggle must be unified and expanded to demand substantial pay increases for all education workers, alongside a massive reinvestment in public education and social services, paid for by carrying out a frontal assault on the criminally derived wealth and fortunes of billionaires and the largest corporations.

What is required to meet the demands of teachers for quality pay and benefits and the right to education for all students? A fight for a genuine socialist program that meets the needs of all workers and young people, a vast redistribution of wealth and an end to the subordination of every social right to the endless accumulation of private profit. If there is any question as to the availability of sufficient resources, last week the astronomical sum of nearly \$1 trillion was allocated for US wars. Additional trillions have been handed to bail out Wall Street. There are more than enough resources to provide to high-quality education for all and a good living for educators.

We urge Twin Cities educators, parents and students to form an independent rank-and-file safety committee, coordinate and extend their struggles with workers involved in similar battles throughout the world. Sign up to get involved today.



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