

[employees-gear-strike](#)). “St. Paul has the experience,” said St. Paul special ed teacher Jeff Garcia. “Minneapolis has the energy. They are really fired up.”

The Minneapolis Federation of Teachers and the St. Paul Federation of Educators both announced February 18 that their members had voted to authorize strikes.

MFT members walked out March 8. The strikers are in two bargaining units: 3,000 teachers and 1,000 education support professionals (ESPs), such as teacher’s aides.

The SPFE, a combined unit of 3,600 teachers and ESPs, managed to leverage its strike threat into a last-minute tentative agreement.

Close on their heels, 200 Minneapolis Public Schools food service workers with Service Employees (SEIU) Local 284 filed their own 10-day strike notice on March 15.

PUSHING FOR STABILITY

ESPs in both cities are being paid poverty wages and living out of cars. The strikers are demanding a living wage for ESPs, along with more mental health workers and smaller class sizes—all of which they say translates directly into stability and supportive learning opportunities for students.

“Nobody is going to let the teachers be gaslit into thinking that these demands are not necessary,” said Marcia Howard, an educator in Minneapolis since 1998. “The answer to ‘But what about the children?’ is ‘Exactly.’”

MFT is also demanding more counselors, caseload caps, lower health insurance premiums, and policies to support and retain educators of color.

The settlement in St. Paul will limit class size, add new counselors, and raise ESP wages substantially. These wins are reinforcing the commitment on the Minneapolis strike lines.

“MFT members get it,” said Shaun Laden, president of the MFT ESP chapter. “If St. Paul can add mental health workers, cap class size, and pay their ESPs \$37,000, Minneapolis can figure out how to do that too.”

SEIU Local 284 is fighting for higher wages. Its members, mostly women and people of color, top out at \$28,000 a year and have to work second jobs to make ends meet.

And all three unions face a threat to the very existence of public schools: a proposed constitutional amendment that would end the state’s mandate to fund public education.

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A BIGGER FIGHT

These unions are part of a larger coalition of Minnesota unions threatening strikes—including county and school clerical staff (AFSCME Locals 56 and 2822), social workers (AFSCME Local 34), and janitors and security guards (SEIU Local 26).

“At a time when billionaires’ wealth is exploding and our state is sitting on a \$7.7 billion surplus, it is maddening we are still stuck in a debate where one side insists there is not enough to provide for the common good,” wrote leaders of the coalition in a joint op-ed.

“That is why our locals have been forced to consider strike actions to move decision-makers to listen to their workers and negotiate fair deals that will address the urgent and necessary demands we’ve put forward that meet the requirements of the moment.”

“We’ve always looked over at St. Paul to try to take from their playbook and how they are building power in their union,” said Ma-Riah Roberson-Moody, ESP chapter vice president in the MFT.

Eventually, said Laden, there was “recognition that we were doing things separately, but some of our circumstances were such that it made sense politically to work together. Teachers in Minnesota are in the crosshairs of ed reform.”

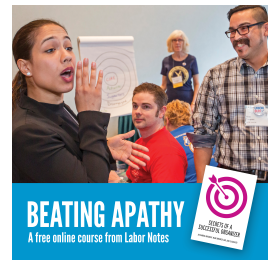
And educators were ready to strike, having experienced the pandemic as “two years of ‘They don’t care if we quit or if we die,’” said Greta Callahan, president of the MFT teacher chapter.

GETTING STRIKE-READY

It’s been 50 years since the MFT last struck, though, so the union had some work to do.

“When we knew the strike could happen,” Callahan said, “we had meetings in every site and let people get their fears out. What if the parents don’t support us? What if the special education students don’t get their needs met? What if the boss comes after me?”

“What is the alternative?” Callahan would ask in response. “That question galvanized members.”



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The ESP chapter decided to use a paper survey (rather than an online one), carrying it from person to person as part of a conversation about what members wanted in the contract.

The organizing for a potential strike and the focus on ESP demands across both chapters has increased the ESP's chapter membership by more than 100.

"If you do something that the members feel deeply about, they are there for the fight," said Laden. "If we are doing something like 'Every year go and tell your legislator your story,' they will not be engaged, because they do that every year and it doesn't matter."

NO MORE SILOS

Not only did the unions in each city have to learn to work together, but teachers and ESPs also had to overcome years of operating in silos within the same union.

The majority of teachers in the Twin Cities are white; the majority of the ESPs are people of color.

Education support professionals work with individual students on their learning needs, most often side-by-side with teachers. But, said Laden, "we are strangers working together who don't know each other."

At meetings, both chapters made a point of talking about cross-chapter solidarity. But for Minneapolis art teacher Silvia Ibanez, the biggest difference was in talking with her own co-workers.

"In my school we got together, and some ESPs were talking about how they need to have more than one job and haven't had an increase in salary for many years," she said. "We didn't know until we had an opportunity to sit down and talk."

Teachers also joined the ESP open bargaining sessions—made easier since negotiating sessions were on Zoom.

"Schools operate to create intentional isolation," said Laden. "There is a lot of tension. Classism plays into that, racism plays into that, and how we operate as a district.

"But as people have learned more about each other and talked to each other, it has been transformational—especially for ESPs, hearing teachers say, 'I am going on strike for ESPs to have a living wage.'"

SOLIDARITY FOREVER

Since the tentative agreement, St. Paul educators have been organizing support for the Minneapolis strikers and joining their picket lines before school. The first weekend of the strike, SPFE members showed up to rally outside the building where MFT was negotiating.

Support from the wider community has been strong too. “I’m at Roosevelt High School, and every morning parents and students are coming to our pickets,” said Moody-Roberson. “There is a sea of honking horns. Our strike fund tripled in one day.”

The deluge of support has shocked management, Laden said: “It seems that the district leadership is in disarray, trying to figure out what to do.”

Solidarity is also being extended from MFT to SEIU Local 284. Educators showed up to rally support while the food service workers were in negotiations.

‘NO JUSTICE, NO STREETS’

The courage and conviction of these members owes a lot to the uprising that swept the Twin Cities in 2020 after Minneapolis police murdered George Floyd. “It showed everyone we need to be in control of our lives, our jobs, our cities,” said Callahan, who is white.

Floyd was killed 263 steps from Marcia Howard’s front door. Howard took a leave of absence to help lead the occupation of George Floyd Square, turning the intersection where he was killed into a memorial and protest site. She’s back to teaching now, but still maintains the fire in the square every day before and after school.

“All of the educators in Minnesota were keenly aware that what happened impacted all of our students,” she said. “At 38th and Chicago [George Floyd Square] we say, ‘No justice, no streets.’ Teachers are saying the same thing. We have decided that we will hold our ground until our demands are met.”

District leaders have tried to couch their decisions—such as a redistricting plan that the union and much of the community opposed because it would displace students and educators—in civil rights terms. But the educators aren’t buying it.

“It is all the same fight,” said Callahan. “When we are fighting for our schools we are fighting for Black lives.”

Howard, who is Black, agrees. “It wasn’t until there was a rally with teachers, some in red [SPFE’s color] and some in blue [MFT’s color], walking across the bridge to St. Paul [that] I knew: this is what solidarity looks like,” she said. “I was in tears.”

“I am aware that I am in a racialized and gendered profession. They expect the white Midwestern women will hear the words ‘What about the children?’ and they will capitulate. But we are fighting for a better world, and one of the battlefields is in our schools.”

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