Saint Paul Teachers' Strike on the Eve of COVID-19

written by Chance Lunning | April 5, 2020



After over nine months of negotiations, on March 10, 2020 members of Saint Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) took to the streets to fight for the schools our students deserve. Then, just one week later, we were back in our classrooms, packing up everything we would need to transition to distance learning, due to COVID-19.

To say that the last several weeks have been a whirlwind is putting it very lightly, but the last month has taught us a lot. We feel a sense of urgency around understanding and generalizing those lessons.To that end, I want to take some time to reflect on what happened during the Saint Paul teachers strike, and draw out some things that the last few months have shown us.

SPFE had been in negotiations with Saint Paul Public Schools since May of 2019, in order to settle the contracts that would cover teachers and support staff for the 19-20 and 20-21 school years. The union brought over 30 proposals to the table, including establishing mental health teams at every site, increased hiring of multilingual staff, increasing support for English language learners and for students that receive specialized services, as well as raises for teachers and support staff that would actually keep up with the rising cost of living.

The district also brought a number of proposals including, among other things, making it easier to put teachers on improvement plans, requiring union leadership and staff to check in with an administrator when entering a school building, reducing the rate at which support professionals–primarily people of color–accrue sick time, and changing the grievance procedure in a way that the union believed would complicate ensuring union representation.

Our proposals were a major strength for us going into the strike, because they spoke to urgent needs that educators around the district were feeling, as well as responding to the needs of students and families. Neoliberalism has created a social crisis where working class families are struggling to meet basic human needs like food, housing, education, and health care. One impact of this on schools is that we are seeing more students who are struggling with instability and trauma. Constant cuts to public education have meant that there are also less staff available to respond to students' needs.

Throughout the process of building for the strike, one of the things we centered the discussion around was the overall mental health crisis that is affecting schools all over the United States, including Saint Paul. Austerity measures that have undercut the ability of the working class to access basic services, a job market that offers workers little more than poverty wages, and a society that is racist from top to bottom, have put many families in a constant state of crisis.

This has a profoundly negative impact on student mental health, and school is often the only place where they have access to any form of mental health care. However, the crisis continues to deepen and broaden, and schools do not have the staff or resources to adequately respond. One of the most profound parts of building towards the strike was hearing the stories of educators who felt like they were put in a position of having to choose which student who may be experiencing a severe mental health crisis they can respond to, not knowing what will happen with the students they simply cannot attend to that day. And this is not just happening in secondary schools; many of the educators I talked to work in a K-5 setting, and they feel the same way.

One of SPFE's other priorities in this round of negotiations was ensuring access and support for multilingual students and families. There are over 125 languages spoken by students and families in Saint Paul Public Schools. In a district with that degree of linguistic diversity, it is a challenge for teachers and parents to keep open the lines of communication necessary to adequately support students. The union proposed a significant increase in the hiring of multilingual staff, which would help educators to communicate with parents, who frequently end up having to use older children as interpreters.

Throughout history, language has been used as a tool to define who is allowed to be included in the national group and who is excluded from political and economic power. That is why it is so important for educators to demand this push to remove linguistic barriers that many of our students face every day. Our students deserve are schools where their cultural and linguistic backgrounds are empowering, rather than being seen as a hindrance.

These, as well as SPFE's other student-centered proposals, sent a message that was clearly heard by parents and the Saint Paul community at large. In much of the coverage of the contract negotiations and the strike, it was clear that Saint Paul teachers were fighting for their students. The district had even agreed that our proposals were responding to important needs in our schools. According to district leadership, educators were making important and even necessary demands, but, the administration claimed, Saint Paul Public Schools simply lacked the available funds to do what educators were proposing.

Educators were told that the district had budgeted a specific amount of money to resolve these negotiations. The money amounted to a 1.5% raise for the first year, and 2% for the second year of the two-year contract. But anything SPFE wanted for our students (mental health supports, multilingual staffing, etc.) had to come out of that money. In other words, we were told that we could either take the raises or get our students some of what they need. Many educators resented being forced into choosing between the needs of their own families and the needs of their students.

Between May of 2019, when negotiations started, and the beginning of 2020, little to no progress was made at the bargaining table. SPFE would come with a set of proposals to discuss, and the district would respond that they would love to do what teachers were proposing, but money simply was not there. SPFE members, of course, understood that budgets are tight. Afterall, we are the people on the frontlines, who see the effects of slashed budgets in our classrooms everyday. Rather, educators argued that this was a question of priorities. The resources that the district has should be focused on meeting students' needs, rather than expanding district-level administration and adding positions that do not have direct contact with students.

Negotiations having stalled, the union moved to hold a strike authorization vote, which was passed by an overwhelming majority, with 82% voting to strike. A little less than two weeks later, we walked off the job.

Going on strike is incredible. You really gotta try it. Since it was cold, we organized warming houses

near our schools–churches, community centers, people's homes, which we could use as bases of operations for our morning pickets. Some mornings we spent in front of our buildings, or we marched to nearby intersections. As we marched through our schools' neighborhoods we chanted. We hung banners from the walking bridges that span I-94. I work in a building where there are four different programs in one enormous building. For many of us, the strike was the first time that we actually got to know the people that work in some of those other programs, despite working alongside them for years.

Each afternoon of the three-day strike, we held district-wide marches and rallies. At each one, we had thousands of educators, students, parents, and community members in the streets. These marches were really important, because they showed the unity among Saint Paul educators and the public support that we had behind us. One of the important lessons I learned is that going on strike is actually really hard! Feeling the support and solidarity of those afternoon rallies was essential to keep up our morale and energy..

Things were going really well. Our members were energetic and motivated, figuring out new, creative ways to picket, and our rallies were powerful and inspiring. However, by the third and final day of the strike, concerns were starting to be raised about Covid-19 virus. At that point, just a few people had been infected in Minnesota, but it was rumored that Governor Tim Walz was preparing to close schools across the state, and members were rightly getting nervous about what this would mean for us on the picket lines. Early the next morning, it was announced that a deal had been made to settle the contract and end the strike. We heard that concerns about Covid-19 had played a significant role.

The agreement at least made progress on all of our most important priorities. We won $4.7 million to establish mental health teams in every school. The district committed to hiring 10 new multilingual support positions, is creating a list of available interpreters and translators, and made changes to ensure that interpreters would be more available for conferences. Schools that are chronically unable to get substitute teachers, which is a common problem in the district, will now get a full-time building substitute. All of that and more is in *addition* to the 1.5% and 2% raise from the districts earlier offer, when we were told we would have to choose between a raise for ourselves, and services for our students.

According to SPFE President Nick Faber, "Only an unprecedented pandemic and concern over the health and safety of our students and staff stopped St. Paul educators from fighting harder and longer for more resources for our children. Still, this strike demonstrated the power educators have when they use their collective voice."

Educators in Saint Paul were absolutely ready to keep fighting had Covid-19 not made it unsafe to go on. Personally, I believe it is likely that we would have won a lot more had it been possible to continue. However, the safety of members, many of whom are in high-risk categories, had to take priority. We returned to work midday on Friday, March 14. Classes were officially cancelled in Saint Paul on the following Monday.

As of this writing, we have not seen our students since March 9th. We went on strike to fight for them, as an act of love, because if there is one universal truth in teaching, it is that teachers love their kids. The prospect of not having them back in our classrooms, perhaps for the rest of the year, is easily one of the hardest aspects of this whole ordeal.

The confluence of the end of our strike and the onset of social distancing in response to Covid-19 brings up some important points that I want to draw out. The first of these is that in many ways the Covid-19 crisis proved a lot of what we were saying during the strike. As schools closed around the

country, those in power suddenly realized what parents and teachers already knew: schools play a fundamental role in the lives of students and their families, as a source of childcare, regular meals, health care, mental health support, and much more. The strike in Saint Paul was really about how we must understand all of the things that schools do and budget in a way that ensures we are able to meet the needs of every student who walks through our doors.

This is crucial because it applies to so many of the jobs workers do in society. We are not simply providing a service. We are a part of the social ecosystem that is supposed to allow us all to get our basic needs met, and more. The strikes that teachers have waged over the last few years, beginning with Chicago Teachers Union's heroic fight in 2015, have shown that we can raise our expectations of what is possible through a union contract. We can fight to make sure that necessary services are available to all, and that our students' needs are met in and outside the classroom. And we can win.

Another lesson the last few weeks have shown us is that regardless of what those in power say, they *do* have the money, and it *is* simply a question of priorities. Moreover, if those in power feel the pressure, their priorities can be shifted radically and quickly. We saw this during the strike in Saint Paul, when the district ended up finding the money to fund our student-centered proposals, as well as paying for a raise for educators. And far more profound examples of this have come out of the crisis created by Covid-19, with massive government expenditures being directed at things like housing the homeless in London, or providing immediate transfer payments to taxpayers in the US.

This is something we need to keep with us when all of this is over. The things that we have been demanding are actually possible, and it really does simply come down to priorities. Barriers to access to education and health care, homelessness, hunger*, and* poverty, exist because those that have the power and resources to end them make the conscious choice not to. They do this, because they would rather live in a world where billionaires exist than in one where everyone can thrive. The last few weeks have given us a glimmer of what is possible when the powerful are forced to change their priorities, if only momentarily. We need to keep our eyes open right now, because this crisis cuts both ways, and the ruling class will not want to miss this opportunity to increase their profits at the expense of the working class.

The strike in Saint Paul was an important reminder of the power that workers have when they come together and fight back. Now the COVID-19 crisis is raising urgent questions about what mass struggle can be right now. We can take inspiration from workers at Amazon, GE, Instacart, and other companies, who have been on the frontlines of fighting for safe and just workplaces.It is essential right now that we are discussing and understanding the quickly-changing moment we find ourselves in. We need to be prepared to resist the inevitable ruling class assault, but even more than that, we need to find new ways to fight for a society that actually prioritizes human need. After all, we still have a world to win.