**Headline:** Minneapolis Teacher Strike Brought Unity, Victory and a Reminder of the Threats Facing Public Education in the U.S.

**Teaser:** Teachers ended a nearly three-week strike, citing advances in pay and working conditions for many members. But more work remains.

By Sarah Lahm

**Author Bio:** This article was produced by [Our Schools](https://independentmediainstitute.org/our-schools/). Sarah Lahm is a Minneapolis-based writer and researcher. Her work has appeared in outlets such as the Progressive and In These Times. Follow her on Twitter [@sarahrlahm](https://twitter.com/sarahrlahm).

**Source:** Our Schools

**Tags:** Education, Activism, Community, Labor, Teachers, Social Justice, Media, Social Benefits, Charter Schools, Politics, GOP/Right Wing, Health Care, Economy, History, Opinion, North America/United States of America, Time-Sensitive

**[Article Body:]**

When Minneapolis high school seniors Dom Newell and Emi Gaçaj head off to college this fall, they will have some impressive credentials to share with their fellow classmates.

In addition to having strong academic records—the kind needed to get into Wiley College in Texas and Columbia University in New York, where Newell and Gaçaj are respectively headed—they will also be able to share stories of the activism they engaged in during the recent Minneapolis teachers strike.

**Why Minneapolis Teachers Went on Strike**

On March 8, the thousands of teachers and education support professionals (ESPs) who make up the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) [walked off the job](https://sahanjournal.com/education/mpls-teachers-strike-minneapolis-public-schools-negotiations-progress/) for the [first time](https://mspmag.com/arts-and-culture/minneapolis-teachers-union-strike/) since 1970 after contract negotiations with the Minneapolis Public Schools failed. Bread-and-butter union [issues](https://progressive.org/latest/twin-cities-educators-say-enough-lahm-220218/), including [class size caps](https://kstp.com/kstp-news/top-news/minneapolis-teachers-return-classrooms-prepare-students/) and stagnant pay, were at the heart of the dispute, along with debates over how best to recruit and retain [teachers of color](https://www.minnpost.com/education/2022/03/scenes-from-the-frontlines-of-the-minneapolis-teachers-strike-from-parents-who-picket-to-teachers-who-wont/) in Minneapolis.

The strike lasted for nearly three weeks. On March 25, a [tentative agreement](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/minneapolis-teachers-tentative-deal-end-weeks-long-strike-2022-03-25/) was reached between the union and the school district, and students and teachers were both [back](https://www.mprnews.org/story/2022/03/29/minneapolis-students-return-to-class-after-3week-teacher-strike) in the classroom by March 29.

This labor dispute puts the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers squarely in line with their [counterparts](https://newlaborforum.cuny.edu/2020/10/03/the-red-for-ed-movement-two-years-in/) in many other cities and states. In 2022 alone, [teachers](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/25/teachers-strikes-us-low-pay-covid) in districts that stretch from [Sacramento](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-03-30/sacramento-teachers-strike-not-just-money-public-education-future) to the Chicago area have gone on strike to protest ongoing contract stalemates and onerous working conditions.

National Education Association President Becky Pringle noted [recently](https://www.vox.com/2022/3/26/22997406/minneapolis-teacher-strike-schools-activism) that school districts have the requisite resources to address the issues being raised through these teachers strikes, but are often unwilling to spend it to meet these pertinent demands. In an interview with Vox, Pringle questioned what came first: a purposeful underfunding of schools or the districts’ claims that the funds they have cannot be utilized to provide children with the support they need in classrooms. She [told](https://www.vox.com/2022/3/26/22997406/minneapolis-teacher-strike-schools-activism) Vox that a lack of funding “is not an excuse that we [teachers] are willing to tolerate.”

**Funding Crunch for Public Schools in Minnesota**

In Minnesota, this dynamic is evident. Beginning in the early 2000s, state tax revenue for public education has [shrunk](https://www.mnbudgetproject.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/lost-decade.pdf?sfvrsn=8c7bd7aa_6) while the demands on teachers, students, and school districts have dramatically increased—especially in the area of unfunded [mandates](https://www.mreavoice.org/special-education-and-el-cross-subsidy/) for special education and English language services.

For the Minneapolis Public Schools, this means the district [must](https://www.southwestvoices.news/posts/mps-is-quietly-facing-a-budget-emergency) pull millions of dollars out of its general education fund in order to cover the cost of educating all students in accordance with the law.

The process of drawing from one pot of money to cover required but unfunded services is known as a [cross-subsidy](https://www.sctimes.com/story/opinion/2022/03/21/your-turn-its-time-end-minnesotas-special-education-cross-subsidy/7090344001/), and it is a situation made worse by the fact that public school districts, like Minneapolis’, must also pay for the special education services that local [charter schools](https://www.startribune.com/minnesota-schools-facing-crisis-level-in-special-education-funding/504601631/) and open enrollment programs provide. In recent years, that dollar amount has risen above $22 million.

Although education funding quagmires such as this are not [new](https://www.tcdailyplanet.net/charter-schools-leave-more-special-education-students-minneapolis-st-paul-district-s/), the lack of adequate resources is an especially bitter pill to swallow in Minneapolis lately, as Minnesota lawmakers are currently wrestling with how to spend an unexpectedly large budget surplus that now [exceeds](https://www.minnpost.com/state-government/2022/02/make-that-9-25-billion-minnesota-budget-forecast-increases-an-additional-1-5-billion/) $9 billion.

So far, there has been no indication that state legislators will use that money to fully fund public education, either in [Minneapolis](https://www.duluthnewstribune.com/news/minnesota/striking-minneapolis-teachers-to-lawmakers-9-25b-surplus-means-state-can-boost-funding) or across the state. This doesn’t mean the Minneapolis Public Schools should be left off the hook.

Greta Callahan is president of the teacher chapter of the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers and has repeatedly [argued](https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-school-district-is-hijacking-pandemic-rescue-funds/600102456/), for example, that school district officials are sitting on millions in federal COVID-19 relief funds that should instead be spent on the immediate needs of teachers, support staffers, and students.

**Student Solidarity With Teachers**

For Newell and Gaçaj, the overall lack of investment in Minneapolis’ public schools has galvanized their burgeoning political activism and allowed them to turn lessons learned in the classroom into action on behalf of their teachers and fellow students.

When reached by phone for an interview recently, Newell and Gaçaj were inside a classroom at Southwest High School in Minneapolis, working on a project related to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

“We are studying this in school” while also participating outside of school in nonviolent protests, Gaçaj noted. Newell also mentioned that, as a Black student, he’s grown up hearing about the Civil Rights era and the actions activists engaged in then to bring about monumental change.

These history lessons have helped Newell understand how to support striking educators through direct action, he says. So far, the efforts of the [Coalition of Student Leaders](https://www.instagram.com/coalitionofstudentleaders/?hl=en), which both of them are part of, have been pretty remarkable. One example includes the [sit-in](https://www.startribune.com/students-hold-sit-in-at-district-office-on-day-8-of-minneapolis-teachers-strike/600156934/) coalition members held at Minneapolis Public Schools headquarters as the strike dragged on.

While there, more than 100 students sat on the floor of the headquarters’ entrance area, [chanting](https://www.leftvoice.org/minneapolis-students-speak-truth-to-power-stand-with-striking-teachers/), “Teachers’ working conditions are students’ learning conditions,” along with other pro-strike messages.

Newell said they had hoped their actions might lead to an invitation from district officials to meet. But, he noted, they were initially rebuffed; they were finally granted an [audience](https://www.leftvoice.org/minneapolis-students-speak-truth-to-power-stand-with-striking-teachers/) with administrator Eric Moore.

“He was dismissive of our concerns and questions,” said Newell, who added that Superintendent Ed Graff was nowhere to be found.

On March 29, the day students returned to the classroom, members of the coalition [took over](https://kstp.com/kstp-news/top-news/minneapolis-school-board-meeting-interrupted-protestors/) a Minneapolis school board meeting to protest a decision that had been made to extend the school year into late June in order to make up for days lost to the strike.

As students chanted against this decision and implored Graff and his board members to rethink the additional days, Graff walked out of the meeting. The next day, he [announced](https://sahanjournal.com/education/ed-graff-superintendent-minneapolis-public-schools-departure-strike/) his resignation from the district.

While Newell and Gaçaj claim no direct credit for Graff’s decision to leave Minneapolis when his contract expires in June, they did note that neither his departure nor the end of the strike means their work is over.

As evidence, they shared a list of demands that have yet to be met, including the “uplifting of historically underfunded schools” and an overall improvement in the way students of color are treated in the district.

**Spreading Awareness of Shocking Teacher Treatment via Tweet**

Kaytie Kamphoff is an inclusion special education English teacher at Minneapolis’ Patrick Henry High School. She also has an active presence on Twitter, where she goes by the [handle](https://twitter.com/whatMsKsaid) @whatMsKsaid.

For Kamphoff, seeing students, parents, and community members hosting sit-ins, joining educators on the picket line, and otherwise expressing solidarity with those on strike has been very rewarding. When she first joined Twitter in 2019, she did so out of a desire to communicate about public education with a wider network of people.

Now, she said, that effort is paying off.

“I have learned that I am a people connector,” Kamphoff stated, and the connections she wants to make involve engaging more community members in the fight to save public education—before, during, and after the Minneapolis educators strike.

Kamphoff began her teaching career in Milwaukee from 2007 to 2011, and her last year there coincided with former Republican Governor Scott Walker’s [bludgeoning](https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/wisconsin-protests/2/) of Wisconsin’s public education system. When Walker pushed hard against teachers unions, members descended on Wisconsin’s state capitol in protest. With help from a research librarian friend, Kamphoff said she began learning about some of the forces behind Walker’s actions.

Those forces, Kamphoff found, included right-wing outfits such as the [American Legislative Exchange Council](https://www.exposedbycmd.org/2021/07/27/alec-inspires-lawmakers-to-file-anti-critical-race-theory-bills/), or ALEC, where very wealthy private citizens have used their personal wealth and influence as a weapon against public services, including education.

The situation in Wisconsin became so dire that Kamphoff said more experienced teachers who couldn’t easily switch jobs warned her to leave the state and pursue a career in education elsewhere. And so she returned to her home state of Minnesota and eventually secured a teaching position in the Minneapolis Public Schools.

Kamphoff then began putting her background knowledge and experience—as well as her natural organizing skills—to use.

When it became [clear](https://www.kare11.com/article/news/education/backed-by-40-community-organizations-minneapolis-teachers-union-prepares-for-potential-strike-tuesday-education-mft59/89-8f6cd826-b1f1-45b6-b6b0-94cb3968b21b) in early March that MFT was going on strike, Kamphoff had a network of supportive parents and community members to tap into. She said she gained 1,500 Twitter followers just before the strike began and used her platform to make parents and community members aware of the issues prompting educators to walk off the job.

Many were shocked to learn, for example, that district ESPs have been making starting salaries of around [$24,000](https://bringmethenews.com/minnesota-news/district-makes-last-best-and-final-offer-to-striking-minneapolis-teacher-support-staff) per year while also paying health insurance premiums at the [same rate](https://www.minnpost.com/community-voices/2022/02/for-two-minneapolis-educators-a-strike-for-living-wages-and-stable-staffing-has-been-years-in-the-making/) as district administrators, who earn six-figure salaries.

Such information has opened the public’s eyes to what is going on in schools, Kamphoff said, and it has helped shine a light on the gap between the Minneapolis Public Schools’ stated values and how the district is actually being managed.

“District administrators pay lip service to things like social-emotional learning, restorative practices, and equity,” she stated, but they “don’t do these things themselves.” A key sticking point for her is the way ESPs have been grossly underpaid. And, since many ESPs live in Minneapolis and send their children to the city’s public schools, that amounts to the district adding to its own [population](https://rc.education.mn.gov/#demographics/orgId--30001000000__groupType--district__p--15) of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch.

A week after the strike ended, Kamphoff acknowledged that MFT members didn’t get everything they were hoping for from the strike. Teacher salaries in Minneapolis are lower than those in many neighboring [districts](https://www.mprnews.org/story/2022/03/11/what-minneapolis-teachers-are-asking-for-and-why-the-district-says-it-cant-afford-it), and that doesn’t appear to have changed much under the union’s [new contract](https://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2022/03/27/minneapolis-teachers-ratify-contract/).

Still, Kamphoff and others have said that the ESPs did win a better deal from the district, thanks to the strike. Many will now be making [salaries](https://kstp.com/kstp-news/top-news/minneapolis-teacher-union-district-agreement-reached/) much closer to the union’s goal of $35,000 per year, and there are new district agreements in place regarding the retention of teachers of color.

“We fought for ESPs, and now we have more bargaining power for our next contract negotiations,” Kamphoff said.

**What the Strike Means Beyond the Minneapolis Public Schools**

Macks Hopland has been working in Minneapolis as an ESP for five years. When asked about his thoughts on the outcome of the strike, he expressed some misgivings.

Yes, he acknowledged, the strike brought some victories, mainly seen in the way communities rallied around the picket lines and offered support to educators. Still, he said he would not call the settlement that ended the strike a win for ESPs.

Most ESPs will not get a salary boost that matches the [current](https://www.thebalance.com/current-u-s-inflation-rate-statistics-and-news-3306139) inflation rate (which is now 8.5 percent), Hopland stated, and this isn’t just a problem for individual employees. During his time in the Minneapolis Public Schools, there has been a chronic shortage of ESPs due to long-standing wage erosion.

Lower wages have meant fewer people can afford to work as ESPs, which sets up a cycle of understaffing, high turnover, and more stress for both students and the staffers who have decided to keep their classroom positions despite the low pay. This all adds up to an [austerity-driven](https://therealnews.com/chronically-understaffed-underpaid-educators-in-minneapolis-strike-against-austerity) crisis for the students and staff members left behind to continually do more with less.

In Hopland’s view, this situation isn’t one that can be easily resolved through contract negotiations. Instead, he thinks it requires a deeper analysis of who really holds the power when it comes to public education. To try to answer this, Hopland published a Facebook [post](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10109449217020175&id=3423295) about some of the behind-the-scenes players who have an outsized impact on the Minneapolis Public Schools.

Hopland rooted his analysis in conversations he had with colleagues while on the picket line. Who, he wanted to know, did people think was really pulling the strings in the Minneapolis Public Schools’ hard-line negotiations with teachers and support staffers?

It is far too simple to only blame the district’s negotiating team or even its top administrator, he concluded. “The superintendent isn’t some stand-alone autonomous agent,” Hopland wrote, “but rather is just another gear, even if a large one, in the larger clockwork.”

The larger clockwork at play in Minneapolis will be recognizable to public education advocates across the country.

Wealthy individuals and corporations typically want to avoid paying more taxes, and public education is among the most costly segments of municipal budgets, Hopland wrote. For at least two decades, those wishing to reduce the tax burden presented by public schools have been [lobbying](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/04/16/former-lobbyist-details-how-privatizers-are-trying-to-end-public-education/) for a grab bag of destructive neoliberal education policies, including the promotion of school choice schemes.

The Minneapolis Foundation does a lot of that [work](https://www.minneapolisfoundation.org/stories/grant-announcement/the-minneapolis-foundation-awards-first-round-of-reimagine-education-grants/) in the city. It is a century-old [philanthropic](https://www.charitynavigator.org/ein/416029402) fund that pulls in donations from some of the wealthiest, most established corporate and family foundations in Minnesota. In turn, it has been at the [forefront](https://www.edhivemn.com/advocacymedia.php) of underwriting Minneapolis’ expansive charter school sector.

Despite the proliferation of school options for families, there remains only one [pot](https://www.chalkbeat.org/2019/6/11/21108318/critics-of-charter-schools-say-they-re-hurting-school-districts-are-they-right) of [taxpayer-funded](https://www.forbes.com/sites/petergreene/2019/12/10/new-report-charter-fraud-and-waste-worse-than-we-thought/?sh=51c464567a22) education dollars, and the billions of dollars provided to charter schools by the federal government seem to have been squandered over the years, leaving public schools with even fewer resources. Fewer tax dollars split among more public schools (charter schools are publicly funded but privately managed) have not added up to better outcomes for most students and educators, either [locally](https://www.twincities.com/2017/02/10/devos-fight-stokes-minnesotas-debate-over-charters-school-choice/) or [nationally](https://networkforpubliceducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Do-charter-schools-get-better-academic-results-than-public-schools.pdf).

It is clear that the recent Minneapolis teachers strike was about much more than class size limits or salary bumps, in other words.

Although some contract-based victories were won on behalf of MFT members, as outlined effectively by Eric Blanc in a recent Jacobin [piece](https://jacobinmag.com/2022/03/minneapolis-teachers-mft-strike-union-reform), public education in Minneapolis still faces an existential threat. For evidence, look no further than the district’s [shrinking](https://www.southwestvoices.news/posts/mps-school-board-discusses-declining-enrollment-and-budget-challenges) enrollment numbers.

Still, Hopland, Kamphoff, and the members of the Coalition of Student Leaders all mentioned the increase in political activism and awareness surrounding public education as a key highlight of the strike, and one they are all dedicated to upholding.

“Minneapolis parents, students, and educators are so awesome,” Kamphoff said. The way people came [together](https://twitter.com/left_voice/status/1504469223929692160) on the picket line recently led her to conclude that “once we see each other’s humanity, we will help each other.”