



Questions about a possible St. Paul educators strike

Q: Is there going to be a strike?

A: A strike is always the last resort and won't happen without a vote of the membership authorizing a strike. The teacher bargaining team has a mediation session on January 25th. It is our hope that the district will come to the table ready to make movement on important open issues such as funding for our schools, EL and SPED staffing, restorative practices, class sizes, wages and benefits AND that they will withdraw proposals to increase our duty day without pay, eliminate class size language for most buildings, and eliminate union leave. EA and SCSP bargaining teams are scheduling mediation dates. We anticipate additional teacher mediation sessions will be scheduled.

If members vote to authorize a strike, the Union's Executive Board determines when to call for the strike to begin. The union is required by law to give a 10-day strike notice before any strike can begin. Negotiations can continue throughout this time and the union and the district can be called into negotiations by the state's Bureau of Mediation Services at any time in an effort to encourage a settlement.

Q: Who can vote in the strike vote?

A: Only SPFT members may vote. "Fair share" fee payers are not eligible to vote or to receive no-interest crisis loans from the union. If you are not a member, you may request the forms required to join the union by contacting our office during business hours at 651-222-7303 or by emailing Julie Hawkins at julie@spft.org.

Q: How will the vote be conducted?

A: Before a vote can be conducted, the executive board will authorize a vote and set a date. Then, the strike vote will be conducted at a central location to ensure only members vote. Eligible voters will receive a ballot when they register at the location of the vote. Voting will take place by secret ballot at the end of the meeting. Votes will be counted by a committee appointed by the Executive Board. A strike is legally authorized if 50 percent plus one of voters participating in the vote cast a "Yes" vote. However, the union's Executive Board will not call for a strike unless there is a strong majority vote in favor of authorizing a strike. It is important that all members participate in the vote. Not voting does not count as a "No" vote.

Q: How will we know when the strike will start?

A: Once members vote to authorize a strike, it is up to the union's Executive Board to set a strike date. State law also requires the union to give the district at

least 10 days notice before the first day of the strike. Strike committees at each school will be informed of the strike date so they can communicate with their colleagues and begin to plan for strike actions and picketing.

Q: What is a strike committee? Can parents join?

A: A strike committee is the group of SPFT member educators who volunteer to coordinate the strike at a particular school. When SPFT members select their strike committee they should make sure that all social and workplace groups within the SPFT membership at that school are reflected in the composition of the committee. The goal is to have a committee that is large enough to ensure prompt, clear communication back and forth with all union members in the building.

Q: Where will strike headquarters be located?

A: The union office will be our strike headquarters and will be the space where members will meet during a strike, get information, and pick up materials.

Q: What if I'm told to report to work during a strike?

A: Management may direct striking educators to report to work during a strike. However, it is legal for teachers not to report to work during the strike. Management does not have to pay educators while they are on strike but they may not retaliate against any employee participating in the strike. It would be illegal to fire, layoff or discipline an employee in retaliation for her participation in a strike. Members crossing the picket line won't be eligible for strike benefits.

Q: Can I work another job during the strike?

A: Strike days are not days off. Members are expected to actively participate in a strike if one is called. Strike captains at each school will be responsible for signing in co-workers each day for picket duty and for other strike activities. The best way to make a strike a short strike is for all members to participate actively and demonstrate their solidarity. Members who do not actively participate in the strike are not eligible for no-interest crisis loans from the union.

Q: Can the district lay off employees in non-striking groups during a strike?

A: It depends. It may be legal under some district contracts for the district to temporarily lay off employees during a strike. If an employee in another group is laid off, they should consult their union about possible benefits or assistance. If they are otherwise eligible for unemployment benefits, such employees could file a claim for unemployment benefits with the state.

Q: How will a strike affect non-tenured teachers and probationary employees?

A: Probationary employees are like any other employees during a strike. They may legally join the strike and must be active participants in the strike to be eligible for no-interest crisis loans from the union. It would be illegal for the district to retaliate against a probationary employee for participating in a strike. Any threat made by an administrator toward or about any member related to their decision to participate in a strike should be communicated to the union office immediately. Such actions would be considered an unfair labor practice under Minnesota state law. The achievement of tenure process for teachers would not be interrupted by a strike. Teachers need to work 120 student contact days during the school year for the year to count toward tenure, there are 175 student contact days in our school year.

Q: Will we lose our health insurance during a strike?

A: Any employee who works at least one day in a month that a strike begins will retain their coverage and the contribution from the district toward their cafeteria benefits for that month. If a strike extended into a second month, you would be eligible to continue their benefits through COBRA. No-interest crisis loans from the union would be available to assist in making payments. You would have 45 days from the start of the month their coverage lapses to elect COBRA coverage and make their premium payment. If a strike ended before the end of the second month, coverage would be reinstated for that month by the district.

Q: What happens if I'm on leave during a strike?

A: Anybody on a district-approved leave may not be denied paid leave or disability benefits to which they are entitled under the contract. However, you may not take paid sick days or other leave during a strike unless it was part of a leave approved before the strike.

Q: If we go on strike, will the district have to add extra school days?

A: No. If enough days of school are cancelled due to a strike (or snow days) St. Paul could fall below the guidelines issued by the state for the minimum number of days and hours secondary students must receive during a school year. However, there is no penalty under state law for a school district that fails to meet these minimum requirements or any direct mechanism for denying funding to the district. Nevertheless, we all agree that time in school is essential for our students. The district could decide to schedule additional days. Payment for those days would be subject to negotiation and could be resolved as part of a new contract agreement.

Q: Can we hold meetings at school to discuss negotiations and the strike vote?

A: Absolutely. The district can't restrict your involvement in union activities in the school building during non-work time (lunch, before and after school, etc.) and also can't prevent conversations with co-workers from taking place during work

time if other non-work conversations are also permitted at that time and place. You should exercise caution in communicating with students and parents during the work day unless the conversation has a clear curricular purpose or is initiated by the parent or student. Conversations about negotiations or a strike outside of work time may not be restricted by the district in any way.

Q: When are we allowed to talk to parents or students?

A: You are free to speak with parents or other community members about our negotiations. Care should be taken so that this does not interrupt teaching or conference time and to avoid giving the impression that you are speaking for the district. Conversations with students require additional care and should not take place during class time unless there is a clear curricular purpose or the conversation is initiated by the student. If a student asks you about negotiations, you should defer that conversation to a non-duty time, such as after school.