By Steve Share, Labor Review editor

MINNEAPOLIS — “Thanks for being here. This is how we win,” said Michelle Weise, president of Minneapolis Federation of Teachers Local 59. And with that, she led a stream of Minneapolis teachers and education support professionals down the hall to fill the meeting room for the December 12 Minneapolis School Board meeting.

“See this — this whole room is union,” remarked Jason Morzenti, as he surveyed the standing-room-only crowd clad in blue MFT t-shirts and carrying banners. “We’re here in support of our contract and in solidarity with our union,” Morzenti told a reporter. “This is our contract. This is how we take care of our kids,” said Morzenti, a ninth grade geography teacher for 3-1/2 years at Washburn High School.

The group came to district headquarters to back MFT representatives who planned to advocate for “the schools our students deserve” at the public comment period at the beginning of the school board meeting.

“The teachers are here to advocate on behalf of the students,” said Ken Shain, a 7-year Minneapolis teacher nominated for Teacher of the Year.

The teachers this year are using contract negotiations to advocate for student needs under a concept that’s become known as “bargaining for the common good.”

The teachers’ contract, Shain explained, “is the document that describes the conditions of classroom life for students in the district.”

The teachers envision a contract that includes obvious issues like classroom size, but also includes concerns like ensuring clean and healthy buildings, introducing restorative practices as a new approach to student discipline, giving all students 30 minutes of daily recess, and providing supportive services for students and their families.

In fact, MFT worked over the summer with teachers, parents and community members to develop a 10-point platform, “Common Sense Bargaining for the Public Good” elaborating on the issues above and more.

As part of that effort, MFT conducted a survey of teachers’ ideas — and received 1,500 responses.

“In this contract campaign, we’re putting forward a student-centered narrative… We’re bargaining for the good of the community,” explained MFT president Weise. “All of our proposals fall under one of the 10 points.”

Unfortunately, Weise reported, “the district has come back and said ‘no’ to every single proposal.”

MFT’s contract expired June 30, 2017 and negotiations for a new two-year contract with the district have not progressed after five negotiating sessions. One more planned negotiating session remains. After that, the school district has asked for mediation, which is likely to begin mid-January.

The teachers’ show of force December 12 won’t be the last. “We are going to do a monthly school board action,” Weise said, “not to be disruptive,” but to highlight the issues in the 10-point platform.

“As educators, our students are always at the center of the work we do,” South High English teacher Mary Manor told the school board December 12.

“We will be there every month until we have a tentative agreement or a contract,” Weise told the Labor Review.