Hundreds protest at Minneapolis school board

MFT Local 59 teachers call for ‘the schools our students deserve’

By Steve Share, Labor Review editor

MINNEAPOLIS — Hundreds of Minneapolis teachers and other school staff, together with union and community supporters, turned out February 13 for a truly massive protest at the Minneapolis Public Schools district headquarters.

The sight was breathtaking: long lines of picketers marched along three sides of the district offices, carrying a sea of blue and white signs.

Signs read: “ALL MPLS KIDS DESERVE FULLY FUNDED SCHOOLS... ALL MPLS KIDS DESERVE SMALLER CLASS SIZES... ALL MPLS KIDS DESERVE EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS... ALL MPLS KIDS DESERVE RECESS...” — and more, echoing the points of Minneapolis Federation of Teachers Local 59’s 10-point platform, “Common Sense Bargaining for the Public Good.”

The teachers are engaged in protracted negotiations with the school district for a new contract.

A massive crowd — 600 people or more — picketed the Minneapolis school district’s headquarters February 13, including teachers and other school staff, as well as other union and community supporters.

Candidates for governor vie for labor support at AFL-CIO forum

By Michael Moore, editor, St. Paul Union Advocate

ST. PAUL — The four leading DFL candidates for governor made their pitch to union activists from across Minnesota at a forum February 16 in St. Paul, promising to support working people and their organizations if elected.

State Reps. Erin Murphy and Tina Liebling, U.S. Rep. Tim Walz and State Auditor Rebecca Otto were united in their opposition to right-to-work legislation and support for union organizing and collective bargaining.

[Watch the full debate at the Minnesota AFL-CIO’s “Campaigns Conference” on the state federation’s Facebook page, www.facebook.com/mnafclcio].

Bargaining rights and professional standards would be off the table in Capitol negotiations with Republicans under her administration, Murphy said. Otto pledged to be the “most pro-labor governor since Floyd B. Olson.” Walz cast himself as an “organizer in chief.” Liebling spoke of finding inspiration in the iconic photos of Memphis sanitation workers carrying “I am a man” signs.

Unions, Liebling added, are “about human dignity and freedom, about being able to stand together and fight to have a decent life.”

The candidates also branded their union credentials. Murphy is a member and past executive director of the Minnesota Nurses Association, Otto and Walz are former members of Education Minnesota, and Liebling was a steward in her union when she worked as a public defender. All four said they had walked a picket line in the last.
social studies teacher at Patrick Henry High School and a member of the MFT Local 59 negotiating committee. Harder has taught for 19 years in the Minneapolis Public Schools.

“We knew we would have a solid turnout for the rally,” she said. But the enormous crowd, she added, “exceeds our expectations.”

“Our work we do at the bargaining table is core to the work we do with our students and our schools,” Harder continued.

She emphasized the importance of MFT’s 10-point plan. 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.

“The work of education is not contained to a couple of topics,” Harder said. “It’s all encompassing.”

Along with Harder, one of MFT Local 59’s other three lead negotiators is Mary Manor, who is in her sixth year as an English teacher at South High School.

“People turned out because they know our students can’t wait for fully-funded schools,” Manor said, explaining the large crowd. “It’s been a long time since we put this many feet on the ground.”

Although the Star Tribune reported the crowd at 200-plus, this reporter and veteran crowd-counter would put the number at easily three times that number — or more.

“This turn-out shows teachers know, ESPs know, parents know, the community knows,” Manor said. “People came here saying the students can’t wait.”

Manor rejected the school district administration’s contention that the MFT 10-point plan is too expensive, given the district’s projected $33 million deficit for the 2018-2019 school year.

She countered: “If they’re talking about deficits, what about the deficit in nurses? What about the deficit in educational support professionals?”

“Finite funding is a myth,” Manor maintained. “We can spend our money in a smarter way, in a more effective way.”

“It’s a falsehood to believe any budget cuts at schools aren’t going to affect kids,” Harder added, as the district is floating various proposals to trim costs.

As the throng of people marched back and forth on the sidewalks outside district offices, Lindsay Brooks, a teacher at Anderson Elementary, stood with a sign that read, “MPLS KIDS DESERVE SMALLER CLASS SIZES.”

Her four-year-old daughter played in the snow with a friend. Brooks explained she had come to the rally “to support my students and my own child.”

The crowd also included Minneapolis school custodians, who recently reorganized as members of SEIU Local 284.

“We’re all in this together,” said Will Aanonson, who has worked 15 years for the district, including the past seven years at River Bend Education Center. “We’re all fighting for the same things — it’s all about the kids.”

After the marching and speeches outside by teachers and labor leaders, the crowd filed into the Minneapolis school board’s meeting room as the meeting was about to begin. They chanted and carried their signs as they walked up the center aisle, passed by the school board members, and then exited a side door. The noisy procession lasted nearly 30 minutes.

School board members Rebecca Gagnon and Ira Jourdain stood at their seats as the procession passed. School board member KerryJo Felder wore an MFT t-shirt. School board member Nelson Inz nodded his head in time with the chanting.

And when the marchers finished, almost all of the school board members applauded.

Earlier, district superintendent Ed Graff told members of the crowd: “I appreciate you being here and advocating for our kids.”