

# POWER *of* COMMUNITY

*Organizing for the schools St. Paul children deserve*





Care about  
Educat  
because we  
about your

Keep the  
Dream  
Alive!

I  MY!  
Teachers



On an unusually warm mid-February afternoon in Minnesota, members of the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFT) gathered in front of the offices of Saint Paul Public Schools before the start of a school board meeting. The teachers, in the midst of a contentious contract fight and nearing a strike vote, found themselves surrounded by hundreds of supporters—parents, students, elected officials, representatives from other unions and community leaders.

It's not unusual for members of a labor union to have others join them in solidarity in the midst of contract negotiations. However, it was clear to anyone who joined in the rally that day that this wasn't just about a two-year contract. The very presence of those who trudged through the melting slush represented an emerging vision—not only for the union, but also for everyone with a stake in making sure that Saint Paul children have the teachers and the schools they deserve.

Two weeks later, after negotiating nearly 24 hours straight, the union reached an agreement that was ratified by an overwhelming 95% vote. The agreement included provisions for smaller class sizes, access to preschool, education of the whole child, family engagement, placing teaching before testing, wage and benefit increases, culturally relevant education and high-quality professional development for teachers. It was a landmark contract.

However, this isn't just the story of a successful contract campaign. This is the story of a group of dedicated educators who, in the midst of a constant barrage of attacks, dramatically changed the conversation. It is the story of a union that knew that in order to bring about the transformation necessary for the betterment of the entire community they needed to transform the way in which they did business. It is a story of visionary and consistent leadership that built trust and delivered results. It is the story of parents, teachers and community leaders coming together in partnership to find solutions.

This is the story of the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers, how they won and how they will continue to win for the kids and community that they serve.

*Written by Eric S. Fought*

# POP MACHINES TO GYM MEMBERSHIPS

Mary Cathryn Ricker was elected SPFT president in 2005. A middle school English language arts teacher, she brought to the job 13 years of classroom experience. She also brought a vision for the future of the union, a union that required significant changes in order to move forward in a challenging landscape.

When talking about the shift that has occurred under Ricker's leadership, teachers and SPFT staff often employ an analogy. For many years, the union operated as a pop machine—members put their money, or dues, in the machine, expecting the product they were thirsty for at the moment to fall near their feet. When you don't get what you want from a pop machine, you end up kicking it because you feel powerless. Buying an ice-cold pop also doesn't require you to do much; you simply put the money in the machine, expecting it to work for you.

Ricker and her colleagues who elected her saw another way. Instead of the pop machine model, work began to move the union to a model that represented more of a gym membership. Gym members pay a monthly membership fee but results are only possible if you show up and do the work. Walking on the treadmill and lifting weights in the midst of a community of fellow fitness-seekers keeps you motivated. Together, you celebrate the results of the work you've been able to accomplish.

Elected on a desire to increase professionalism and return the union to its roots of social justice activism, Ricker began to take steps toward building a healthier environment that achieved those goals. The opportunity to lead and be the public face of the organization was reserved for the president. Ricker worked to expand the leadership opportunities for her fellow officers and other members of the executive board. She began to engage with community leaders who shared concerns and hope about the future of public education. Most importantly, she listened.

A key to the success of the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers under Ricker's leadership has been their willingness to adapt to changing needs in the way they do business. The hiring of organizers such as Paul Rohlffing and Leah Lindeman brought about a new understanding of the potential of the organization to move from a focus on simply resolving conflicts and putting out fires to a vehicle for developing leaders and organizing for change.

Ricker became engaged with the statewide advocacy organization, TakeAction Minnesota, serving on its board of directors. In that role, she began to more fully understand the power of organizing. As the union considered filling staff vacancies of departing and retiring business agents, an opportunity was presented.

Rohlffing recalls the environment he found himself walking into when he joined the staff in 2008. "From a staff perspective we had a very service-oriented union culture," he said. "The organizers were called business agents and the expectation was that you called our office when you had a problem. We kind of functioned like your car insurance agent. You paid your dues, but when you were in the teacher equivalent of a car crash and you needed help, you called the office and somebody from here would go out for the meeting with your principal or deal with your problem."

Instead of the title "business agent," Rohlffing and Lindeman asked to be given the title of organizer. Stewards were trained to take many of the calls from members regarding concerns and grievances, freeing up the organizers time to focus on organizing. And they started working on two fronts—building leadership in the union around small-scale organizing and addressing building-specific issues. For example, the organizers mobilized folks in stopping cuts to the district's music programs.

Staff worked with music teachers in organizing a rally with parents and kids playing instruments outside the school board before a meeting, turning a bunch of parents and allies out to those conversations.

Through these small-scale organizing efforts, members saw these proactive actions as a more powerful way to engage.

It also helped internal leadership within the union to realize that there were options for engaging district decision-making other than just accepting the district position as the “way it is going to be.” Instead, a desire developed to continue to see what would happen if members organized. And the culture within the union began to shift.



# ENGAGING PARENTS

Organizing efforts and leadership-development initiatives were not limited to members. Involving parents in discussions of the future of the profession and the schools in which teachers serve was an important step in finding common ground and cooperation. Nick Faber is the elected secretary of SPFT and an elementary-school science teacher. Faber has led the union in many of its parent-engagement efforts, including an innovative SPFT-led parent/teacher home visit program.

*...in reality if we're out talking with each other on a regular basis, talking about what's going on in our school, we find that parents and teachers are really on the same side.*



“The key thing is that parents and teachers are the two people that know our kids best,” Faber told me. “Between the two of us we spend the entire day with them. And if you sit us down talking, building relationships through the parent/teacher home visit project or through other ways of engaging parents in our union, we start to realize we have the same concerns. And there are a whole lot of forces out there trying to pit us against each other. But in reality if we’re out talking with each other on a regular basis, talking about what’s going on in our school, we find that parents and teachers are really on the same side.”

Zuki Ellis was a parent who wasn’t always a believer before such engagement. In 2011 Ellis was a college student at Metropolitan State University and needing to fulfill an internship requirement. At the same time, her oldest son was struggling in school.

“I used to get all these calls about things that had already fallen apart,” Ellis said. “And I didn’t feel like I had the ability to do anything about that. If he’s failing a class why are you contacting me when the class is over, when there is nothing we can do about it?”



When a professor at Metro State suggested that she do her internship at SPFT, Ellis pushed back, saying, “Are you kidding me? I’m so mad at teachers, that doesn’t make any sense.” But the professor continued to encourage her and she agreed to an interview with Leah Lindeman for the internship. Once Ellis accepted the opportunity, she began attending Contract Action Team trainings with members. And in those rooms she heard the teachers express their own frustrations. “I was sitting there listening to conversations and having conversations with teachers and found out that they were frustrated about the very things I was frustrated about. It was a very nice conversation to have. All these things I was upset about regarding my son and not being able to get resources for him to help him with classes were things that they struggled with as well. Everything just sort of clicked.”



Following the internship experience, Ellis has remained involved, becoming a strong parent leader in the union, sitting in on negotiations, speaking at events and advocating in public, side-by-side with teachers, for the schools that Saint Paul kids deserve.

The parent/teacher visit project has also transformed the way in which parents and teachers work together in educating kids. The model used in Saint Paul was created in Sacramento, California public schools and is being implemented in over 200 mostly urban sites throughout the country. The Saint Paul program is unique in that it is the only program of its kind to be run directly out of the union. Through the program, teachers and parents come together outside of the classroom as teachers reach out to the families on their home turf.

“We start to understand each other more,” Faber said. “A large part of the project is about breaking down assumptions we have about our parents and assumptions parents have about us. I think that was the most powerful thing for the first six teachers that went out and

visited homes. When we came back and talked about our visits, one of the things we realized was that we had these huge assumptions about parents surrounding poverty and all of these deficits we thought they had. And not to say that we didn’t visit homes where there were some things that concerned us. But we also walked away saying, ‘There’s a lot to work with here,’ that we hadn’t thought of. That was really powerful for us.”

The project has found great success and SPFT now serves as a regional training center for the national organization that organizes it. Faber worked closely with the National Education Association (NEA), American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and Education Minnesota to secure the funding necessary which, in part, allowed him to take a leave from the classroom to continue to build on the relationships begun with parents and teachers through the initiative. One of the keys to the success of the contract campaign was the organizing work done to involve parents and connect them with teachers throughout the process. This was a direct result of the funding provided and Faber’s work.

# CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

Many factors contributed to the success of the most recent contract campaign and the transformation that the union has experienced in recent years. However, in conversations with members of the SPFT staff and leadership, members, parents and community partners, it was clear that one process the union undertook—a process that is ongoing—was the turning point and catalyst for change.

For more than a decade, public educators and public education as a whole has been under attack by well-funded radically conservative reform advocates. The goal in these nationwide campaigns has been to undermine the roles of teachers and their unions in public education, as well as undermining public education itself. They have used concern about legitimate challenges around racial equity in schools to effectively build a coalition with others who are generally pro-public education and pro-teacher. And, for many years, teachers found themselves defensive, trapped and powerless in their attempts to respond.

According to the narrative that often dominates public discussion about public education, teachers don't know how to teach, they must be monitored and disciplined. Anyone can learn to teach—it's just a job with some training needed. Teacher unions protect bad teachers, make unreasonable demands of the system and are holding educational reforms hostage. This dominant narrative also holds that "No Child Left Behind" works and that the achievement gap is so complicated that teachers and administrators really just don't know what to do.

In Saint Paul, it was clear that in order to move the teaching profession forward and improve the educational experience of students and families, the conversation had to be changed dramatically. Simply trying to refute the story being told was not working.

When organizer Rohlfling joined the staff of SPFT in late 2008, he came with a great deal of experience working in coalition with other labor unions and community organizations. In a previous role with a SEIU local in the Twin Cities, Rohlfling worked on issues related to

health care reform in the state of Minnesota. It was in that work that he met Dave Mann, Associate Director of the Grassroots Policy Project, who was leading the coalition in a process to consider shifting the dominant narrative around health care reform.

"What Dave helped our organizations do together was to talk about the idea of health in a totally different way," Rohlfling said.

"Dave saw that a lot of the time when we were talking we were using terminology that had been expressly created to support a market-oriented approach to health care."

Rohlfling saw a similar challenge in the way people in Saint Paul were talking about public education. Ricker had also worked together with Mann while serving on the board of TakeAction Minnesota and decided to bring in Mann and begin a process of considering the public education narrative rut that everyone was stuck in. It was also important to Ricker, Rohlfling and other leaders that the work not be done in isolation and leaders from the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) were invited to join in the process.



"I think once we began the process, we saw a critical need to help people find some hope and not just be in hunker-down defensive mode," Mann said. "There was a need to do something that started to internally change the story about the union so that there would be more energy and more involvement,



including both veteran and younger teachers. And there was a need—if they were going to flourish as teachers and as a union and have an active role—to make this shift to be thinking about power. I think that the understanding of power and the power it takes to win a real fight—as opposed to negotiate a settlement—was not clear for many people.”

Many organizations strategically consider ways to frame issues that are important to the group’s future. However, in the process undertaken by SPFT and MFT, those engaged wanted to make sure that it wasn’t simply a matter of drafting new talking points.

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*Development of their own narrative began with a deep discussion about the values and beliefs that they bring to their work as educators.*  
.....

The unions used their new narrative to help guide them in taking a look at how they thought about issues and how to

create public conversation about what they were fighting for. GPP provided ongoing consultation over the following years to help integrate the narrative into all the union’s strategic work—leadership development, member engagement, internal and public communications—and shaping both the content and strategies around contract campaigns.

“Working in partnership with Dave and GPP was the grip we needed,” said Ricker. “We started having the narrative itself have a seat at the table. We’d be in executive board meetings, and we’d be in the same old conversation that we’d always been in regarding administrative quality or about other frustrations and suddenly someone would say—wait a minute, what does the narrative say about this? So rather than chasing our tail in the same way we had always chased it, where we would air our grievances, we would physically pull out the narrative and read through it. Suddenly it became how we lived.”



# A NEW NARRATIVE FOR TEACHERS, EDUCATORS AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

## *WE ARE COMMITTED TO BUILDING A GOOD SOCIETY.*

American public schools are vital in preparing students to become active and informed participants in democracy. As educators, our obligation is to help students of all backgrounds learn to understand each other, to work together, to take personal responsibility for their world and become world citizens. Schools should be places where our students can debate ideas, challenge established thought and construct new meaning for themselves as they better understand the world around them. As educators we must support this learning with a strong grounding in established knowledge and an open mind toward new solutions, recognizing that we are preparing students for a world we do not yet know.

## *WE BELIEVE IN HONORING THE VALUE OF AND CULTIVATING EACH STUDENT'S POTENTIAL.*

As educators we recognize that a quality education does not look the same for everyone. Each student comes to us with unique qualities and needs, and we work to honor and nurture their differences. Everyone should have the opportunity to fully develop their potential and be recognized as multi-faceted individuals whose worth cannot be determined by one measure alone.

The true purpose of public education is to shape the future of our society by building educated citizens who are caring, healthy, and productive and, who are fully prepared for the world ahead of them. Fulfilling this purpose means ensuring students become lifelong learners through the creation of educational experiences that are both challenging and joyful.



***WE BELIEVE WORKING IN COMMUNITY IS ESSENTIAL TO STUDENT SUCCESS.***

A strong public school exists in a context of, and collaborates with, its community. Community and family involvement in schools provides needed support for all students, including those whose education is compromised by societal challenges of transience, poverty, and discrimination. These challenges arise from the community, and the community and schools must share responsibility for their resolution. Building relationships and working as partners will help students connect with their community, and teaches them that we all value education. These partnerships can provide students with real opportunities to apply their learning and develop stronger communities where everyone is respected.

***WE BELIEVE EDUCATING STUDENTS IS A CRAFT THAT REQUIRES TALENTED AND COMMITTED PROFESSIONALS.***

Education is one of the most complex tasks in our society. We are skilled professionals who combine experience in the classroom, extensive knowledge of content, and an understanding of how students learn to create engaging lessons for our students every day. Because learners are different, educators become innovators and develop variety and depth in their techniques and approaches. We match these skills with deep concern for students' progress and well-being. The relationships we develop with students help them build and reach their own potential and passions.

The most important work in public education occurs in the classroom between educator and student. This vital relationship must be valued and nurtured by everyone. Effective decision-making in education must arise from the classroom through a partnership between the educator, the students, and the families.

***WE ARE COMMITTED TO WORKING COLLECTIVELY AS A POWERFUL FORCE FOR JUSTICE, CHANGE AND DEMOCRACY.***

Because we believe a good education is at the heart of a good society, the Minneapolis and St. Paul Federation of Teachers initiates policies and develops values that improve public education. We actively create structures critical to recruiting, supporting, and retaining high quality professionals. We advocate for students tirelessly and work diligently to ensure a climate where real learning takes place so that all students are provided an excellent education. We believe all students can be successful in school and in life.

*St. Paul Federation of Teachers and Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, September 2010*

## ASKING THE QUESTIONS, LISTENING TO THE ANSWERS

In the spring of 2012, Ricker traveled to Finland to participate in a discussion where she met Barnett Berry of the Center for Teaching Quality and author of *Teaching 2030: What We Must Do For Our Students and Our Public Schools*. Ricker had several conversations about the future of public education with Berry and was interested in the possibility of using the book to help continue the discussion that began with Mann in 2009.

At roughly the same time, teachers in Chicago went on strike. “We saw how Chicago teachers were making these connections in their communities,” said Lindeman. “Mary Cathryn, Paul and I made a trip to Chicago to talk to their leadership about what they were doing and what was working.”

Following both of these experiences, Ricker was inspired to engage these ideas in a new way as a contract campaign approached. She notes, “I returned from Finland and this experience in Chicago, and I remember sitting down with Leah one day and saying, what if, before we even put together a bargaining team, we actually asked parents and the community what they want to see in our contract first?”

Taking Berry’s book and *The Schools Children Deserve* by Alfie Kohn, leaders proposed a series of group discussions on the books. They asked an outside facilitator, Dr. Ros Carroll, retired professor at Hamline University, to lead the process.



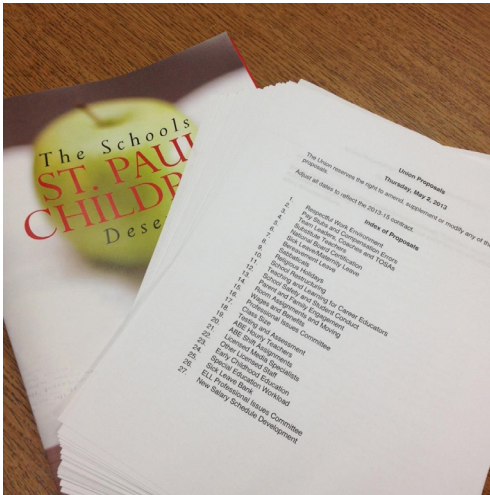
Lindeman remembers folks asking, “What if we took this idea of having a book club or a study group and made it not just be about the books, but about what we really want in Saint Paul public schools? Let’s build a platform of ideas that we can start to work toward. The original idea of creating the document ‘The Schools Saint Paul Students Deserve’ was not just about the contract campaign, it was about grounding ourselves to be sure that we were always working toward the same goals.”

The study groups began by grounding themselves in the new narrative. While the process included reading the books and discussing the ideas contained therein, a series of listening sessions and an online member survey ensured broader participation from members, parents and community representatives.



Participants were tasked with answering three questions with the ongoing contract negotiations in mind:

- What are the schools Saint Paul children deserve?
- Who are the teachers Saint Paul children deserve?
- What is the profession those teachers deserve?



Through this process and with the work of a researcher, the document was created and became the grounding narrative for the contract campaign and the community of parents, teachers, students and community leaders who came to the table to begin bringing about the ideas contained in its pages.

Together, they came to believe that Saint Paul students and families deserve:

- Educating the whole child
- Family engagement
- Smaller classes
- Teaching, not testing
- Culturally relevant education
- High-quality professional development
- Access to pre-school

An electronic version of the full report “The Schools Saint Paul Students Deserve” is available on the SPFT website, [www.spft.org](http://www.spft.org).

*The only way you are going to shift people’s thinking is through them actually having the experience of seeing something totally different.*

This report wasn’t a set of ideas that the executive board or a group of members drafted behind closed doors. As a matter of fact, throughout the process, leadership intentionally took a step back, involving outside facilitators like Mann and Carroll to engage in a frank discussion of the problems, questions and answers. The entire community had a stake in the process, just as they have a stake in their schools.

“The only way you are going to shift people’s thinking is through them actually having the experience of seeing something totally different,” Rohlfsing said.

# THE CONTRACT CAMPAIGN

Armed with a new narrative concretely fleshed-out in a document that answered the important questions, the union faced contract negotiations with greater energy and resolve than ever before.

When Leah Lindeman joined the staff as an organizer in 2011, she brought extensive experience with open bargaining in other local unions. Starting with negotiations for the previous two-year contract, Saint Paul teachers conducted an open bargaining process. “We have moved through the past two rounds with open contract negotiations,” Lindeman noted. “The nature of open contract negotiations, everyone being able to witness and see, is that they are transparent. You can say whatever you want about what you saw or heard at the bargaining session. It is all out there. That transparency goes a long way in building members confidence in their union, trust in their bargaining team, and motivation to be involved in the process.”



During recent campaigns that trust turned into training and action, as members became part of Contract Action Teams. The teams are comprised of a set of leaders who cover every building in the district and who have a dual responsibility. They are two-way communicators—it is their job to bring information about negotiations and actions in support of negotiations back to their members, and it’s their responsibility to collect feedback and assessments and

questions and concerns from their rank-and-file coworkers and feed them back to their union. Besides acting as the communications hubs, the team members actively became organizers and leaders in their buildings. Union staff trained them to organize, showing them how to mobilize their coworkers, have effective workplace conversations and answer tough questions.

Contract Action Team members also actively participated in the open negotiations process, a shift from previous contract negotiations where bargaining team members were alone in the room with district representatives. This move was, at times, controversial. Denise Rodriguez, a middle school Spanish teacher and the union’s Vice President, has been a part of the past four contract negotiations as a member of the bargaining team. “Bringing the CAT team members into the room was a very different way of doing things that left me unsettled,” Rodriguez said. “I felt powerless. Maybe the bargaining team wasn’t as valuable as we thought we were.”

But then Rohlfling put another metaphor into the mix. He encouraged both the bargaining team and CAT members to see breaks in the negotiations as a time-out on the basketball court. In the beginning of a time out, the coaches huddle together to decide next steps. Then they present their plan to the team. In the context of bargaining, the bargaining team members were the coaches, the CAT were the athletes about to head back to the court.

“I watched how the process turned out, and I became a believer,” Rodriguez admits. “Our members saw that it was working, and it was.”

Breaking the mold of traditional collective bargaining, the union put forward proposals far beyond wage and benefit requests, based on the recommendations that arose from the study groups and listening sessions. They took the stance that issues often considered “management rights” belong in negotiations. Teachers requested smaller class sizes and less standardized testing, along with the hiring of additional librarians, nurses, social workers and counselors. These requests



were placed directly on the negotiating table as members advocated for the issues as central to their working conditions and overall effectiveness in the classroom.

In September of 2013, the district walked away from open negotiations and filed for mediation. Negotiators claimed that the issues that were brought to the table by the union did not belong in the bargaining process. In response, teachers amped up their outreach and engagement with parents and the broader community. On the following Thursday when negotiations were scheduled to continue, members went door to door to share their vision for the future of Saint Paul Public Schools.



On Tuesday, November 12, SPFT members and parents packed the school board meeting. Board members received packets containing signatures from 4,000 people who signed a petition in support of the bargaining teams. Another 2,000 signatures were collected following the meeting.

SPFT partnered with Minnesota 2020, a progressive, new media, non-partisan think tank to produce videos highlighting priority bargaining proposals. Each Monday a new video was released publicly, continuing the open negotiations, with or without the district. Minnesota 2020 had approached the union seeking ways to help, encouraged by the collaborative process and vision outlined by the teachers. The videos are available on the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers YouTube channel.

In January 2014, hundreds of teachers and parents met outside of dozens of Saint Paul public schools in the midst of a Minnesota snowstorm for a nontraditional “walk-in.” At each school location, a member briefly spoke to the crowd, emphasizing the priorities outlined by teachers, parents and the community and the need for all parties to get back to the bargaining table. As parents were organized to stand with teachers and their kids, it was a visible reminder of the power building taking place and a sign of momentum in the campaign. Rather than walking out, everyone walked in to school to start the day.



Increasingly, members were prepared to strike if necessary. On February 10, the SPFT executive board voted to authorize a strike vote to take place on February 24. With this announcement, the campaign encountered a new turning point. Parents became even more engaged, creating their own Facebook group to show solidarity and to discuss ways in which they could support teachers and students if a strike happened. The group became a space for parents to publicly vent, work through disagreements and connect, without the influence of the union other than responding to factual questions. Other labor unions took public positions in support of the teachers. Informational sessions were held and, for the first time in Saint Paul since 1989, steps were taken to prepare for a possible teacher strike.



Finally, in a marathon bargaining session on February 20-21, the district agreed to negotiate on all the issues the union had put on the table. A strike was averted. A historic contract was agreed to and ratified. The teachers won, as did every resident of Saint Paul.

Media covering teacher contracts generally hesitate to include any details outside of the dollars and cents and other such details agreed upon. This is reflective of the dominant narrative that implies that teachers are greedy and the union's job is to protect them and get them better pay. That was the case with reporters covering previous SPFT contract resolutions.

However, in their coverage of this contract, the Pioneer Press and other outlets included stories about the broader wins for teachers and students, including many of the priorities outlined in narrative documents and highlighted in every step of the campaign. In a story titled "St. Paul Teacher Deal Goes Beyond Wages and Class Size," reporter Mila Koumpilova wrote, "Taxpayers wondered about wages and benefits. But in more than 60 pages of new or revised agreements were also innovative ideas that drew little attention. A rethinking of the traditional parent-teacher conference, an avenue for educators to make over their schools, new support for novice teachers—those are just a few among potentially consequential changes to the contract."



# COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

As discussed in other sections of this report, connecting with the broader community inside and outside of contract campaigns has been an ongoing priority for President Ricker and her team. This includes ongoing conversations and relationships with elected officials and other leaders. And it means continuing a long tradition of Saint Paul teachers fighting for what is right—especially in matters of racial, social and economic justice. That long tradition includes being home to the first organized teacher’s strike in the United States. Female members of Local 28 conducted that strike in Saint Paul beginning on November 25, 1946.

*...the need to be engaged in the issues that affect the broader community and not focus solely on improving professional conditions is a fundamental role for the union.*

“There is a deep historical precedent in this local of lots of community activism that, the more I learned about, the more I got excited,” Ricker said. “It wasn’t just the 1946 strike, although that was obviously something that really captured my attention. Generally, teaching doesn’t really attract firebrands, although I think teachers are more militant than we give ourselves credit for.”



In recent years those “firebrand” members of SPFT have played a pivotal role in many

endeavors, partnering with other labor unions and the broader progressive community. In 2006, SPFT members called on the Minnesota legislature to pass the “Cover All Kids Bill,” which cut in half the number of children who didn’t have access to basic health care in the state. In 2012, the union successfully engaged its members in the campaigns to defeat two divisive constitutional amendments that were placed on the ballot in Minnesota. This year, members are active in campaigns to raise the state’s minimum wage and national efforts to reform our country’s broken immigrations system.

For Ricker and others, the need to be engaged in the issues that affect the broader community and not focus solely on improving professional conditions is a fundamental role for the union. “It has to be both—we have to be assertively and aggressively working on community-benefit issues and we have to be the voice for teaching and learning quality in our field at the same time,” she said.

Dora Jones is the founding executive director of Mentoring Young Adults, a Saint Paul nonprofit that provides housing, education and employment services for youth from the ages of 14 to 25. She met Ricker at the State Capitol several years ago.



“We began to partner together to figure out what we could do to address the achievement gap,” Jones recalled. “How do we deal with



that on both sides of the fence? So, we met a few times and started working together, working with the youth.”

Once a year, Jones brings youth that she works with for an informal discussion at the SPFT offices, a meeting they have come to call “TWT: Talk With Teachers.” The meeting is aimed at eliminating the often-strained communications between teachers and students of color. Jones still remembers the first such TWT. “Three years ago, the first one was so emotional for everybody—we even had teachers crying, saying ‘I never knew you guys felt that way about Caucasian teachers.’ Some of the youth were also in tears telling their stories and saying, ‘You guys don’t care about us in the classroom...you treat us different in the classroom.’ So, we were digging into some of those things. And it really got emotional... and that was healthy conversation. It went so well that we decided to do it again. We’ve been doing it for four years now.”

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Similar to the results found in engaging with parents in the home visits, out of these conversations comes real change in the classroom. Teachers take the knowledge back and try to improve the situation. Students begin to realize that they aren’t really alone in their feelings and have an outlet to express frustration. Further, community leaders like Jones are respected partners engaged in finding solutions where they are needed most. “We can talk to the school board all day and try to make changes there, but if we’d don’t really start dealing with the issues inside of that classroom—where the teachers are everyday—then we are not really going to change anything,” she said.

## A WORK IN PROGRESS

In all of my discussions with staff, leaders, parents and community leaders I heard over and over again that successfully winning the most recent contract campaign was not an ending point. There is a deep sense that the work that began with Ricker's election in 2005, continued in 2009 with the narrative discussions and then through the study groups and the culture shift in the union's office were just the beginning of what is about to continue.

"This is the fifth contract that I've negotiated," Ricker told me. "Every other time I have felt a complete feeling. There was always a sense that we had just finished something, and we didn't have to think about it for a while until we gear up to do it again. This was the first time I knew that collective bargaining was just a tool in the tool belt of all of the work

we're trying to do. I feel like there are a few things that we're still dusting off. And this is a work in progress. It's all a work in progress."

While the agreements reached with the district were important, they are only a start towards building the schools that Saint Paul children deserve. They are only a start towards bringing the values and beliefs expressed in their narrative into full reality. Just as important is the new coalition that has emerged as a result of the work done through the contract campaign and the years that preceded it. That coalition now knows what is possible when people courageously come to a common table to build power around issues that matter to everyone. And after a short break, they went to work planning their next steps together.



# LESSONS LEARNED

- ◆ *Grounding in values and beliefs is powerful. Speaking and acting out of your own story is critical to building strong relationships within the membership and with the community.*
- ◆ *Transparency is key. Keeping the process open and available to the public allows everyone to see what you are fighting for and to join with you.*
- ◆ *Make intentional space for all perspectives to be heard. This is true internally (e.g. bargaining team) and in public spaces (e.g. meetings with community members).*
- ◆ *Start early – there are no shortcuts to good organizing but the payoff is huge. Building ownership, leadership, and involvement of members, parents and community members takes time and resources.*
- ◆ *Build around proactive change, don't just play defense. Get everyone involved in thinking about how to improve public education grounded in the shared values, beliefs and experiences.*
- ◆ *Be bold. Expand beyond issues “typically” addressed in contract negotiations.*
- ◆ *Expect and prepare for some pushback. When you change how you act as a union there will be pushback both internally and externally. Be open to it but don't get trapped by it.*
- ◆ *When you do all this, parents will have your backs and they will energize your members.*

This report was a joint endeavor of the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers and Grassroots Policy Project.

The Saint Paul Federation of Teachers is a union of more than 3,200 teachers and education assistants serving in Saint Paul Public Schools. From the beginning, SPFT has worked, and will continue to work, for better schools for children and for better working conditions for all members. For information: [www.spft.org](http://www.spft.org)

Grassroots Policy Project (GPP) partners with social movement organizations and unions to develop grassroots power for social transformation. GPP cultivates strategic practice with an emphasis on the ways long-term strategy is brought into an organization's day-to-day work and how that impacts both what an organization does and what it is able to achieve. A key component of their work is the practice of shifting public narratives to help make the seemingly impossible, possible. For information: [www.strategicpractice.org](http://www.strategicpractice.org)



What's on my Plate?  
Grades  
4th house  
DB form Rldt  
DHH  
415  
Elem

What's on my plate?  
SYNCA  
ELEMENTARY

What's on my Plate?  
Jim Lytle

What's on my Plate?!

What's on my Plate?  
Address On my Plate?  
Experience Corp

What's on my Plate?  
Learners work book  
Risk Factor

What's on my plate  
Nancy Hader  
Speech/Lang  
THIRD PARTY BILLS  
PR & CARE  
THERAPY  
COLLABORATION  
PROVIDE SPEECH LANGUAGE THERAPY TO STUDENTS WITH IEPs  
HSA  
MONTICELLO  
MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE  
SANDY SPRING  
SENIORES PAPERWORK

What's on my plate?  
Grades  
K-5  
Spanish Teacher  
Sergio L. Hoy

What's on my plate?  
Teacher  
Linda

What's on my plate?  
Sandy Grop  
All Day  
Linda

What's on my plate?  
RC  
Teaching  
Linda

What's on my plate?  
Kathy Hering  
Gr 1-3

What's on my plate?  
trach  
collaborate  
train  
plan  
provide  
support  
ML  
MCA  
TEAT  
2000



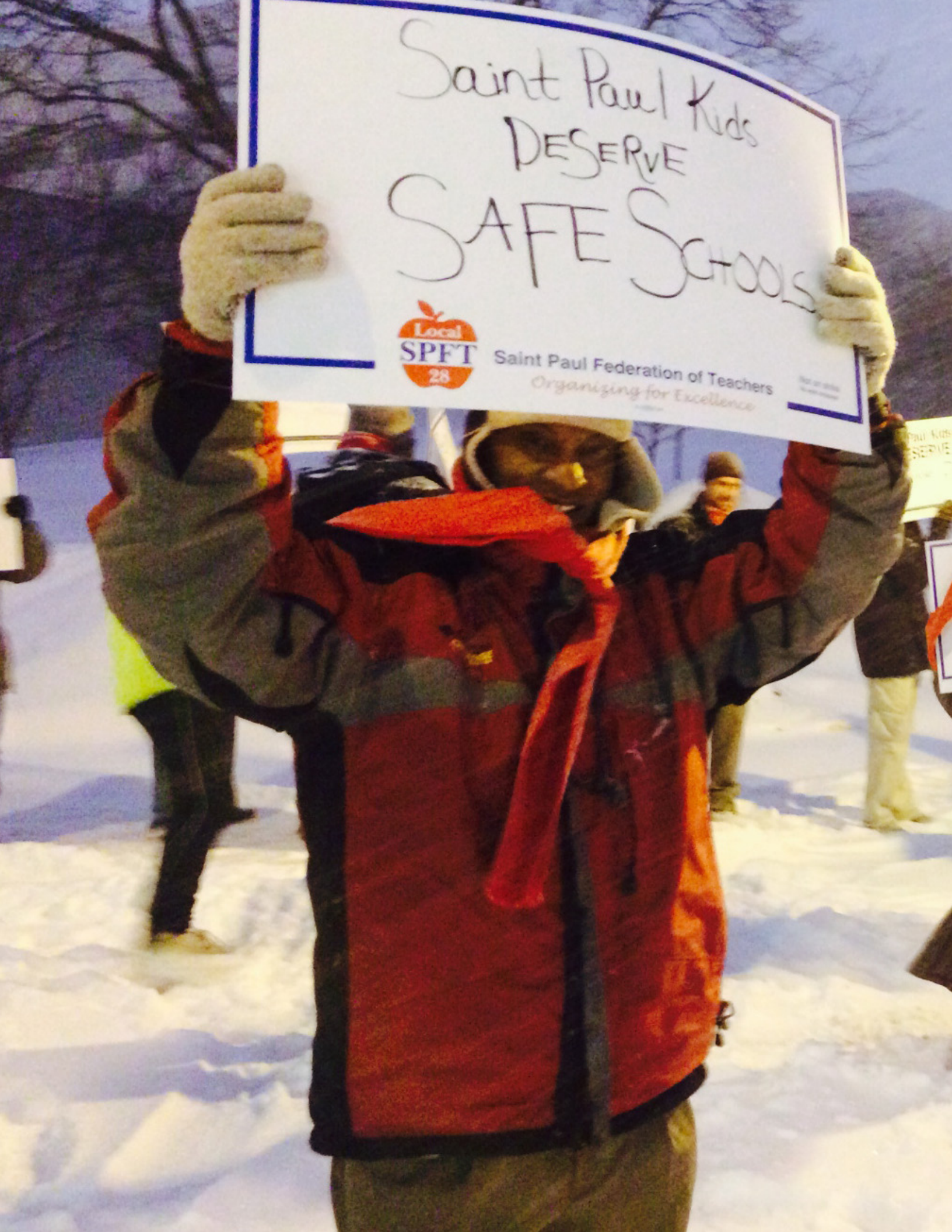


Saint Paul Kids  
DESERVE  
SAFE SCHOOLS

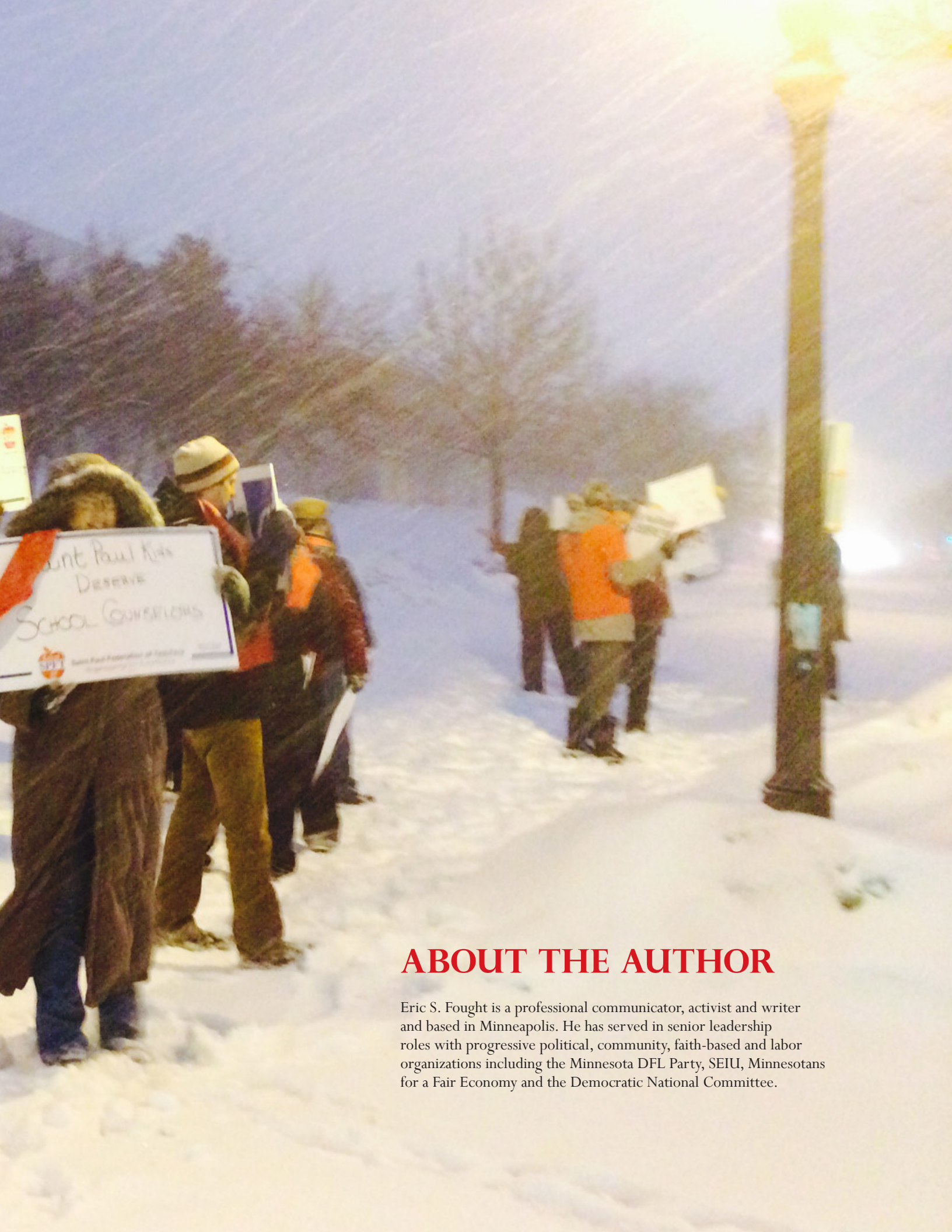


Saint Paul Federation of Teachers  
*Organizing for Excellence*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric S. Fought is a professional communicator, activist and writer and based in Minneapolis. He has served in senior leadership roles with progressive political, community, faith-based and labor organizations including the Minnesota DFL Party, SEIU, Minnesotans for a Fair Economy and the Democratic National Committee.





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