

# ‘Everybody has eyes on Newton’: The teachers strike is over, but more fights are on the horizon

By Deanna Pan, Mandy McLaren and Christopher Huffaker Globe Staff, Updated February 3, 2024, 4:31 p.m.



Newton Teachers Association celebrate after an announcement that a contract has been settled in Newton, MA, Feb. 2, 2024. NATHAN KLIMA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

With the longest teachers strike to roil a Massachusetts community in three decades finally over, parents, school officials, and community leaders may now be wondering: Where will educators walk the picket line next?

The Newton teachers strike that ended Friday tested the limits of support for public education in Massachusetts — a progressive state known for its public schools — at a time when educators, burnt out and beaten down by a bruising pandemic, are demanding better pay and benefits to keep up with the staggering costs of living here.

But there's a mismatch between what communities claim they want and what they're willing to pay for. Moreover, municipalities are hamstrung by state law that limits their ability to raise taxes to meet teachers' demands.

It's a recipe that [portends more strikes](#) in districts where contract negotiations are stalling, especially when those who went on strike can show their extraordinary measure paid off with higher salaries and improved working conditions.

"Everybody has eyes on Newton, for sure, right now," said Rachel Rex, head of the Gloucester Teachers Association, which will soon begin contract negotiations with its school committee.

Glenn Koocher, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, said he estimates 15 to 20 districts are worried about upcoming contract negotiations. Leaders there are terrified they won't have enough money to meet union demands, he said.

"A lot of districts that have contracts coming up are thinking about what this means if the unions are becoming more militant, if they're not afraid of a judge, if they're not afraid of being held in contempt, and if they think it can get them more," Koocher said.

Teacher strikes are illegal in all but a dozen states, including Massachusetts. But in the past two years, teachers here [have shown](#) their willingness to cross that line, despite stiff financial penalties: Brookline teachers were the first, striking for one day in May 2022. Peers in Haverhill and Malden followed several months later, then Woburn for five days in January 2023. Andover teachers walked the picket line for three days this past November.

The Newton strike, which began Jan. 19, was the latest, longest, and most contentious salvo among the recent spate of teacher boycotts. The bitter battle between the Newton Teachers Association and School Committee locked students out of classrooms for 11 days and [sowed deep divisions](#) in a wealthy Boston suburb that had long taken pride in the reputation of its schools.

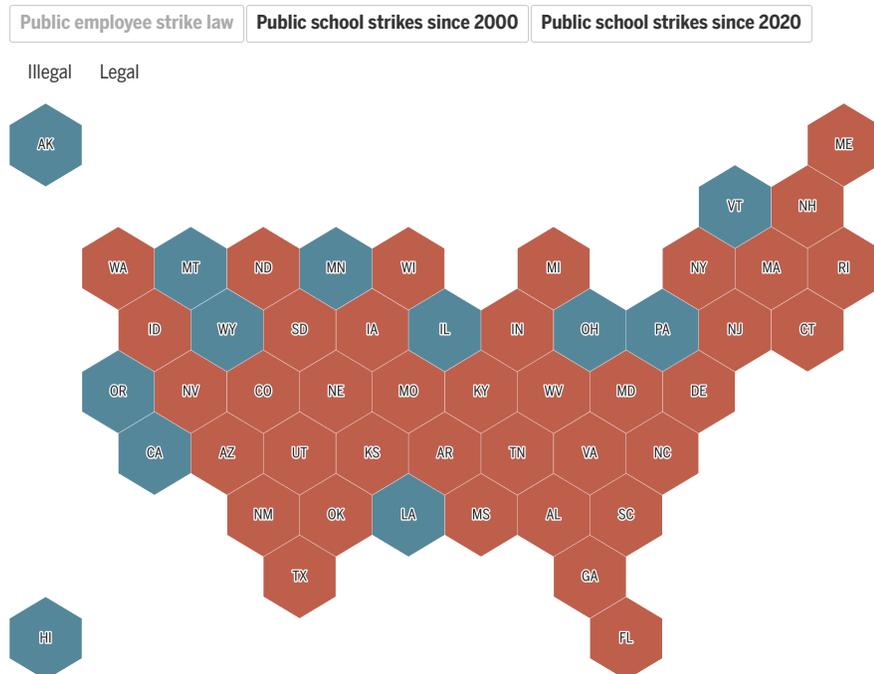
“Strikes tend to lead to more strikes,” said Rebecca Kolins Givan, associate professor in the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers University. “When contracts are settled — not only without a strike, but without moving towards a strike — there’s a question about whether more could have been achieved with more significant action.”

Teachers strikes, once a rarity in Massachusetts, are [rising at a faster clip](#) here than the rest of the country, according to Melissa Arnold Lyon, assistant professor at the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy at University at Albany, SUNY. Lyon has tracked roughly 750 teachers strikes across the nation since 2007: Seven occurred in Massachusetts — all of them since 2019, Lyon said.

“That’s the way that labor actions happen sometimes,” Lyon said. “It only becomes an option once you see it happen.”

## Teacher strikes have surged in Massachusetts, even though they’re illegal.

From 2000 to 2020, teacher strikes were very rare in Massachusetts.



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The work stoppages in Massachusetts coincide with a national resurgence in strikes in both the public and private sectors that started in 2018, with the “Red for Ed” movement in which fed-up teachers in states, including West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona, walked off to protest gutted school budgets and stagnant wages.

Gerald Friedman, an economics professor and Massachusetts Teachers Association member at UMass Amherst, said labor conflicts, particularly strikes, are a consequence of the current economic conditions: Inflation is rising faster than teachers’ pay, but under the state law Proposition 2½, municipalities can raise taxes by only a few percentage points each year, limiting their revenues.

“You’ve got one side demanding a lot and the other side very resistant, so you get strikes,” Friedman said.

Massachusetts cities and towns can raise taxes past the Prop 2½ limit — but only with a referendum such as the one that [failed in Newton last March](#), when voters rejected a nearly \$9.2 million property tax hike meant to fund the city’s infrastructure and public schools. More such votes are likely to fail as the population ages, Friedman said, particularly in expensive communities like Newton.

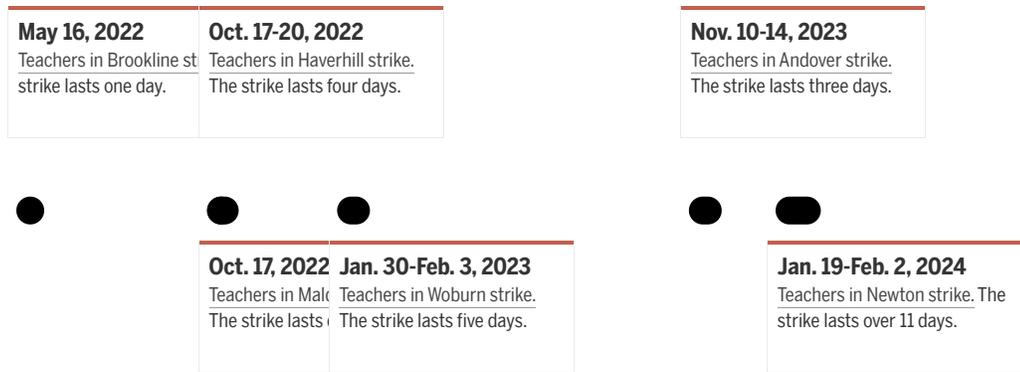
“You’re running into a shrinking base of support for the schools because people don’t have kids in the schools,” Friedman said.

As a result, teachers, who are paid less than other highly educated professionals, are feeling the squeeze.

[Data from the Economic Policy Institute](#) shows average weekly wages for teachers fell nearly 9 percent, adjusted for inflation, from 2021 to 2022, while wages for other college graduates kept pace. That means the pay gap widened: Teachers in Massachusetts now earn more than 20 percent less than workers with similar education levels.

## Timeline: Two years of teacher strikes

Since 2022, unions in six Massachusetts districts have gone on strike.



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Max Page, president of the MTA, which represents 117,000 educators, said strikes are a last resort for local unions in tense and protracted contract negotiations; the vast majority are able to resolve their contracts without walking out. In Newton, for example, teachers bargained with the School Committee for 16 months before voting to strike.

“In other words, they have confronted school committees or mayors who were simply unwilling to address the important issues they brought forward and then they finally reached a point where they felt like this was the only step that they could take,” Page said. “This was never anyone’s strategy or choice.”

Page also resisted the idea that strikes beget more strikes.

“Strikes are not a virus,” he said. But unions across the state have been taking note that the issues teachers went on strike over — such as higher wages for their lowest paid members, namely paraprofessionals and teaching aides — are the same issues they’re grappling with.

“I think they gain confidence for standing up for themselves,” Page said.

Indeed, union leaders in Massachusetts have shown less reluctance to take aggressive action, noted Eric Blanc, assistant professor of labor studies at Rutgers University, than those in other states. Rank and file teachers feel more empowered to fight for better contracts on the heels of a demoralizing pandemic that pitted educators against parents in rancorous debates around school reopenings.

“There is a new willingness to fight back that maybe we hadn’t seen in previous decades,” Blanc said. And younger educators — who, polling data shows, are among a generation that is more supportive of unions — are “more willing to take a risk,” he said.

It’s a trend Brian Murray, 48, a Newton high school teacher, has witnessed among his younger co-workers, many of whom cannot afford to live in the city or surrounding MetroWest communities. Housing is just too expensive, he said.

“Most of my colleagues who are retiring, or have recently retired, were in the real estate market in the 1990s and were able to situate themselves somewhat comfortably in towns such as Newton, Cambridge, and Brookline,” he said. “Younger colleagues feel that the train has left the station, for good reason.”

Other teachers unions have paid attention. Conner Bourgoin, president of the Tewksbury Teachers Association, said the Newton strike was a necessary step for accelerating the glacial pace of the teachers’ contract negotiations. But he hopes his union, which has been at the bargaining table since December, doesn’t reach that point.

“We are proud of what they are doing and taking a stand for students,” Bourgoin said. “We’re energized by their energy. Their solidarity is inspiring.”

*James Vaznis of the Globe staff contributed to this report.*

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