

## The political issues facing Detroit teachers

**Statement of the Socialist Equality Party  
and WSWs Editorial Board  
23 August 2005**

The conflict between teachers and the Detroit public school authorities raises fundamental political questions which every school employee should carefully consider. The vast majority of teachers know full well that there is no way to avoid a fight against the ruthless and provocative concessions demands of Detroit Public Schools CEO William Coleman and the politicians at the city and state level.

But it would be a serious mistake to believe that strike action by itself can defeat these attacks. Unless it is accompanied by a new political strategy aimed at mobilizing the entire working class population against the political agents of big business in Detroit, Lansing and Washington DC—Democrats as well as Republicans—this strike will end in defeat as have so many in the past.

Make no mistake. The full-page ad published in Tuesday's newspapers by the school authorities is a declaration of war. It begins by declaring that any strike is against the law—a clear threat to impose fines and other sanctions against rank-and-file teachers as well as the union. We are therefore immediately confronting a direct government attack, which can be answered only by a fight for industrial action by every section of workers in the Detroit area, combined with a struggle to build a genuine political party of the working class.

The dead-end of isolated strike action without an independent policy advancing the needs of workers and a political party to carry it out can be seen in the tragedy unfolding at Northwest Airlines.

Just as airline workers need to put forward a policy for workers and the flying public in opposition to the brutal and reckless profit-driven policies of the companies, so teachers need to advance a policy to utilize public resources for the good of ordinary working people, rather than the bipartisan policy of the Democrats and Republicans to further enrich a privileged elite by gutting social services, destroying public education and driving down the living standards of the working class.

This requires a radical and fundamental shift in priorities: from the profits and personal wealth of the ruling class to the social needs of the vast majority, from deepening the chasm between rich and poor to a policy designed to promote social equality. Instead of squandering hundreds of millions of dollars to build stadiums and luxury apartments, hand out tax rebates to the auto companies, and pay six-figure salaries to school bosses like Coleman, the wealth produced by working people should be utilized to provide decent schools, secure and well-paying jobs, health care and all other basic human needs.

How many new teaching positions and new schools could be established with the tens of billions of dollars that are being wasted on an imperialist war in Iraq that was launched on the basis of lies and illegality? A war, moreover, that is being waged with the full support of the Democratic Party.

Many of the future graduates of Detroit's schools will become the economic conscripts to be used as cannon fodder for this and future wars that are now being prepared.

A policy that places the needs of the people before corporate profits will never be carried out by the Democrats or Republicans. Decades of Democratic control of Detroit have proven the futility of relying

on this big business party and the utter fraud of its claims to represent "the people."

That is why, at the very center of any strike action must be the fight for a break with the two-party system and the building of a mass party of the working class based on socialist policies.

The primary obstacle to a successful struggle is the policies of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT). The DFT leadership has already capitulated to the school officials. Over the past two years, in addition to accepting a pay freeze that nullified a scheduled wage increase, the union has stood by while hundreds of teachers and many more support staff and maintenance personnel were laid off. Schools have been shut down, while other schools have lost whole departments.

The DFT bureaucracy is incapable of defending the needs of teachers, and public education as a whole, precisely because it defends the profit system and opposes the political independence of the working class.

The argument being promoted by the DFT leadership that the current fiscal crisis is solely the result of wasteful spending and mismanagement is both simple-minded and deceitful. There is waste and mismanagement in abundance, along with rampant corruption, but the assault on public education in Detroit is driven by something deeper and more systemic: the crisis of the capitalist system as a whole. This is demonstrated by the fact that public schools are under attack in every part of the US, and increasingly, around the world.

In any event, the mismanagement, incompetence and corruption that have plagued Detroit's schools are largely the handiwork of the very Democrats whose party the DFT leadership continues to support and present as the "friend" of the teachers. For their part, the leading Michigan Democrats—Governor Jennifer Granholm and Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick—have done nothing but institute austerity measures since taking office.

Now the union leadership is waxing militant, chanting, "No Contract—No Work!" But it has made no serious preparations for a strike and has advanced no strategy to conduct a struggle.

That teachers are angry and are looking for a way to fight is both understandable and appropriate. There is no shortage of a willingness to fight and sacrifice among Detroit's teachers. Merely being a teacher in this city requires a high degree of self-sacrifice, toughness and compassion.

But the issue facing teachers is not one of militancy, it is one of political perspective. All those groups and individuals who glorify strike action as a thing in itself and avoid raising the critical political issues are misleading the teachers.

The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers to combine industrial action with the fight for the building of a new political party of the working class based on socialist policies.

We propose the launching of a campaign for the widest possible solidarity action by working people and youth, including meetings, protests and sympathy strikes against teacher layoffs, wage cuts and school closures. Any attempt to impose fines or other sanctions against teachers should be countered by a general strike involving all sections of the working class.

We urge teachers and school employees to discuss these policies, read the *World Socialist Web Site*, and write in to the WSWs to become active in the fight to implement a socialist political perspective.