

Sellout danger in Detroit teachers strike

By Walter Gilberti
31 August 2006

With the strike by 7,000 Detroit teachers only three days old, a sellout concessions deal between the leadership of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and the school district is already in the works. On Wednesday it was reported that DFT negotiators along with those from the school district had agreed to a court-imposed gag order.

Since Monday afternoon, round-the-clock negotiations in the presence of state mediator Jim Amar have been taking place. Teachers voted en masse last Sunday to strike against drastic concessions demands contained in the contract offer from school district CEO William Coleman. In the three days that teachers have been manning picket lines in front of their respective schools, there has been a continuous outpouring of support from area workers, parents and students.

Local television channels have reported opinion polls showing overwhelming public support for the teachers. One such poll reported pro-teacher sentiment at 72 percent.

Yet the DFT has done nothing to mobilize this support, despite the threat hanging over the teachers of harsh fines—one day's pay for each day on strike—under a state law banning strikes by public employees. The entire political establishment—the school officials, Democratic Mayor Kwame Kirpatrick, Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm, the media—has ganged up against the teachers, blaming them for the disastrous state of public education in Detroit in an attempt to turn the public against their struggle and force them back to work.

The DFT and the city and state AFL-CIO, the United Auto Workers, the Teamsters and other area unions are deliberately seeking to isolate the teachers. Meanwhile, the DFT is working behind closed doors to arrive at an agreement that will continue to make teachers pay for the city's fiscal crisis and the legacy of official negligence and the diversion of resources

from the schools to tax breaks for big business and subsidies for casinos, sports stadiums and high-rent condos. This is in a city that, according to newly released US Census figures, is the second most impoverished in the country.

No picketing is scheduled for Thursday or Friday, when the schools are officially closed for the extended Labor Day weekend. No rallies or mass meetings have been called. As a result, the teachers will be demobilized and dispersed while negotiations intensify in advance of the scheduled return of students on Tuesday, September 5.

Instead, the DFT is telling teachers to turn out Monday for the annual Detroit AFL-CIO Labor Day parade—a ritualized event that has for more than a decade exemplified the vast decline of the unions, attracting only a narrow layer of workers along with the trade union bureaucracy and its hangers-on. The primary purpose of the parade is to provide an occasion for Democratic politicians to posture as “friends of labor.”

At a meeting of picket captains Wednesday morning, DFT President Janna Garrison made only a brief comment: “We are making some progress... I am hopeful that we can get this resolved.” This empty statement underscores the essential purpose of the gag order, which is to keep the teachers in the dark, the better to spring an eventual sellout on them.

At this point, the strategy of the school board, the city and the state is to rely on the union bureaucracy to isolate the teachers and facilitate the imposition of a concessionary contract. Meanwhile, they hold in reserve the weapon of legal sanctions and fines.

The concessions demands of the school district and Coleman, whose annual salary is \$220,000, constitute a vicious assault on the living standards and working conditions of teachers. They include a 5.5 percent pay cut. Veteran teachers would be forced to pay 10 percent of their medical costs, while those hired after 1993 would have to pay 20 percent.

The existing freeze on step increases, which affects newer and younger teachers, would continue. Other

concessions include a reduction in paid sick days from ten to five, the loss of some preparation periods for K-8 teachers, a lengthening of the school day, and the elimination of bonuses for attendance, longevity, and teaching in critical shortage areas.

Garrison and the DFT leadership are unwilling and unable to advance a strategy to defeat the attacks on the teachers, since any such struggle would pit them and the entire working population directly against the Democratic Party, with which the DFT is allied, and

the corporate elite whose interests the Democratic and Republican parties defend.

In order for the struggle against concessions and against the attacks on public education to proceed, teachers must wrest control of the strike from the DFT bureaucracy, work to mobilize the independent strength of the Detroit-area working class, and fight for a break with the Democratic Party and the building of an independent political movement based on a socialist program.

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