

Detroit teachers vote narrowly to end strike

By Joe Kay and Lawrence Porter
14 September 2006

In a close vote, Detroit teachers on Wednesday voted to end their 16-day strike and return to work on the basis of their previous contract, pending a mail ballot on a tentative contract approved by the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) the day before. The new contract includes an estimated \$60 million in concessions.

The struggle of the teachers was undone by the DFT leadership and the rest of the Detroit trade union bureaucracy, which did nothing to mobilize the broad popular support for the teachers and instead isolated the strike, leaving the teachers to face the threat of fines and other reprisals on their own. The teachers had defied a court injunction issued the previous Friday ordering them to return to work, as well as demands by School Superintendent William Coleman that a state law banning public employee strikes be enforced.

Most teachers who streamed into Cobo Hall for the mass meeting Wednesday morning where union leaders read out provisions of the tentative deal were angry and bitter over the agreement's derisory wage offer and an across-the-board ten percent co-pay on health benefits. They had struck to reverse years of wage freezes and give-backs, school closures and job cuts, and the deterioration of conditions in the schools. The strike had remained solid despite a concerted effort by the media to whitewash the school district and city and state politicians, while blaming the teachers for causing "irreparable harm" to the schools.

But in the face of the treachery and cowardice of the DFT leadership, the vote to end the strike passed by a small margin. Many of the teachers who opposed the contract felt there was no choice but to vote to go back to work.

The contract was reached under massive pressure from city and state Democratic politicians, including Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm.

At Wednesday's mass meeting the reactionary role

of the union bureaucracy was on full display, as it moved to cut off discussion and ram through the contract. It was clear the union leaders felt that a serious, extended discussion would lessen their ability to obtain a back-to-work vote.

As soon as DFT President Janna Garrison finished reading the main provisions of the contract, at least 40 teachers lined up in front of floor microphones. The third teacher to speak praised the contract and then called for an immediate vote. Garrison tried to hold a vote, but was met with an uproar from the teachers, who instead voted to continue the discussion.

After only a few more speakers, however, the same process was repeated. Another teacher, who had been coached by DFT Director of Operations Keith Johnson, voiced support for the agreement and again called for a vote to end the strike.

This time Garrison was able to call the vote, and obtained a majority of about 60 to 40 for a return to work.

Most of those who were able to speak denounced the contract for failing to meet any of the teachers' demands.

The tentative three-year contract includes an across-the-board pay freeze for this year, followed by increases of 1 percent and 2.5 percent in the remaining two years. Taking inflation into account, this will mean a cut in real wages of at least 10 percent.

In addition, all teachers will be required to pay 10 percent of health care expenses, a provision that will be especially difficult for teachers with more seniority. Currently, only workers who began teaching after 1992 are required to pay these costs.

The contract pits different sections of workers against each other, particularly younger against older workers. It restores step increases—the seniority system by which the pay for younger workers increases the longer they stay in the Detroit Public School system. The step increases were frozen last year. Their restoration means that many younger teachers will receive pay increases mandated by the previous contract once the new agreement is approved.

The contract will mean a further deterioration of

conditions in the Detroit schools. Press reports on Wednesday indicated that the school board will meet the remainder of the spending cuts it is seeking by implementing an across-the-board two percent budget cut, which will effect such things as maintenance and school supplies. The school district is also reportedly planning to lay off more teachers and shut down more schools.

The result of the strike poses very clearly the necessity for a new leadership and a new political strategy to fight the attacks on teachers' living standards and on the public school system as a whole. Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party at the meeting distributed the statement, "Reject the concessions sellout! Mobilize Detroit workers behind the teachers!", which called for a break with the Democratic and Republican Parties and the building of a new party, based on a socialist perspective, to represent the interests of working people.

A reporter from the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed several teachers after the meeting.

Nicole said she was opposed to the contract. "As another gentleman said, over the life of this contract we will be paying 10 percent for our health costs, with only a marginal increase in pay," she said. "We will be making less than we made last year."

Nicole also denounced the procedure used by the union to cut off discussion. "We have been fighting to have our voices heard. And to silence our own voices is idiotic. There was no hurry. We have been out on strike this long, we should respect our membership enough to let them raise questions."

Douglass, a math teacher at Hutchins Middle School, said the contract was a travesty. "It doesn't address the real issues," he said. "The system does not care about educating children. At my school there has been no music program for four years. There has been no arts program for four years. There are bullet holes in the stairwell. They have been there for four years. It is wrong.

"We haven't had a raise in three years. Then they say we have the step increases back. But it is like the Stockholm syndrome. You lock someone up and take away their freedom, then you give a little bit of freedom back they are happy and say, 'Oh, thank you for giving me that little bit of freedom.'

"The teachers need to stand up. Now we are going back to the same status quo. Now we are going back to the same schools, the same situation, the same dismal failure rate across the city because no one values children."

Two substitute bilingual teachers said the contract was especially bad for them. Among other measures dealing specifically with substitute teachers, the contract eliminates a provision that allowed substitute teachers to become regular teachers and begin with higher seniority. Many substitute teachers work full time for years before receiving a permanent position.

"Believe me, without the substitute teachers in my school the school would fall apart," one teacher said. Another noted that the financial strains created by the new contract may force her to leave Detroit for another district. "I love my job and I love my students, but what am I supposed to do?" she asked.

SEP Public Meeting

Political Issues in the Detroit Teachers Strike

Thursday, September 14, 7 p.m.

Northwest Activities Center, Ballroom

18100 Meyers, Detroit

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