

Unite Detroit workers to defend public education!

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party

30 August 2009

Detroit teachers stand at a crossroad. The Detroit Public Schools is preparing to impose historic concessions after shutting down dozens of schools. A determined fight by teachers will win broad support and become a pole of attraction for workers throughout the country who are facing similar attacks on their jobs and living standards.

Teachers face a political struggle not only against Financial Manager Robert Bobb and Mayor David Bing, but against the Obama administration and both political parties.

DFT president Keith Johnson has presented his deal with Bobb to extend the current contract to October 31 as a victory for the teachers. This is a lie. By extending the contract two months, the DFT has tied the hands of teachers and provided the city with additional time to carry out its attacks. The DFT, which has publicly opposed strike action, feared that teachers would vote for a strike at today's meeting.

At the same time, Mayor Bing fears joint action of teachers and city workers. By pushing the teacher dispute off for two months, the city can move ahead with its plan to destroy hundreds of city jobs and impose wage and benefit concessions.

Teachers should reject this maneuver and oppose the contract extension, which was carried out without the consent of the membership. Today's meeting should be turned into a discussion on the necessary strategy to defend teachers and public education.

The city continues to insist on \$45 million in concessions, including a 10 percent pay cut and sharp increases in health care costs. Behind Bobb stands the Obama administration, which wants to use Detroit as a test case for the expansion of charter schools and merit pay for teachers based on test scores.

Nearly 30 schools have been shut down in Detroit and 20 more are on the chopping block. Another 41 are being "reconstituted," forcing more than 2,500 teachers, aids and counselors through the degrading process of reapplying for their jobs. Already, 2,000 teachers and support staff have been laid off.

Yet Johnson declared on Wednesday that Bobb is "committed to acting in the best interests of children." What a fraud!

Reject all concessions! Rehire laid-off teachers!

Teachers should reject all concessions demanded by the city. The working class, including teachers, is not responsible for the economic crisis and must not be made to pay for it.

Teachers occupy one of the most important functions in society:

the education of the youth. Pay should not be cut; it should be increased. Those who have been laid off should be reinstated to their former positions, and the humiliating "rehiring" process immediately halted. All the schools that have been shut down should be reopened, with increased funding to provide a decent education environment and quality teaching materials.

The claim that there is no money for public education should be rejected out of hand. There is always plenty of money when it comes to bank bailouts and pay for corporate executives. The trillions handed out to Wall Street and the yearly expenditures on the military make the Detroit city budget deficit look like pocket change.

For the unity of the working class! For a general strike to oppose the attack on wages and benefits!

On Friday, Bing announced layoffs of 205 city workers. This is only the beginning: the city is planning on eliminating at least 1,000 jobs. As with the teachers, the administration is demanding a 10 percent wage cut from city workers, along with drastic reductions in benefits and the gutting of work rules.

Teachers should begin immediately to organize strike activity in defense of jobs and public education in Detroit. But teachers cannot fight this battle alone. A campaign must be initiated for a general strike of all Detroit area workers—uniting auto workers, bus drivers, city workers, alongside the unemployed and retirees—to oppose school and factory closures, layoffs and wage and benefit cuts.

Elect independent committees to fight against concessions!

Absolutely no confidence can be placed in the DFT and nothing it says can be trusted. The DFT leadership has made clear it has no principled opposition to the drastic attacks on teachers; they just want to be part of the process—"With us not to us!" has been their slogan. At the mass meeting in May, they handed the floor over to Bobb and presented him as a friend of the teachers.

The union has explicitly stated that it is willing to implement the type of education "reforms" demanded by the city and the Obama administration. They accept the premise that the crisis in public education is due to the lack of teacher "accountability," the lack of "school choice"—not the systematic starving of our schools through decades of budget cuts. As Johnson's actions demonstrate, the DFT is opposed to any mobilization of teachers.

The DFT, along with AFSCME, the UAW and the other trade

unions, have worked systematically to subordinate the working class to the Democratic Party—the very same corporate-controlled party that is overseeing the attack on education and the working class as a whole.

The prerequisite for any serious fight is a break from these unions-in-name-only and the formation of new organizations of struggle based on rank-and-file committees in the schools, workplaces and neighborhoods. Teachers should elect committees composed of trusted workers to plan resistance and reach out to fellow workers throughout Detroit.

Repeal the No Child Left Behind Act and education “reform”!

The Obama administration is tying the meager stimulus money available for education throughout the country to the implementation of merit pay schemes and the expansion of charter schools, which strip teachers of basic protections and siphon students and funding from public schools.

In refusing to bail out states and cities facing massive budget crises, the administration is forcing them to implement drastic cuts in social programs, including in education.

It is the financial and corporate elite, not the working class, that is responsible for the economic crisis. Yet it is this same elite that is now imposing its solution to the crisis, which means the subordination of education to market forces and the elimination of everything that detracts from private profit. This means breaking the back of public education. Even more than it presently is, education will be stratified by class, with the poor stuck in the worst schools, while the rich are provided with the best education money can buy.

What does real education reform look like? The No Child Left Behind Act should be overturned and replaced with a massive increase in funding to rebuild schools and provide quality education for everyone. The education system should be placed under the democratic control of teachers and the community.

Break with the Democrats and Republicans! For a political party of the working class!

A struggle of workers in Detroit cannot be limited to strike action. It must be guided by a new political perspective, which takes as its starting point the need to defend the independent interests of the working class against the Obama administration and the two corporate-controlled parties.

Many workers thought that Obama would bring “change.” One of the main reasons teachers opposed Bush was because of his reactionary policies on education, including the No Child Left Behind Act. Yet Obama has not only continued these measures; he has intensified them.

Obama’s policy on education is of a piece with the rest of his policies, domestic and foreign. Like its predecessor, this is a government of the financial oligarchy. In addition to squandering vast financial and human resources on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it has handed trillions in public funds to the Wall Street bankers and financial speculators who are responsible for the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

The actions of the Obama administration demonstrate that it is impossible to change things within the existing political framework. Workers need their own party that fights for their own interests.

For socialism and equality!

It is not possible to establish a decent and equitable system of public education without addressing the decay of our cities and the enormous levels of social inequality in our society.

In Detroit, unemployment currently stands at 30 percent, and as much as 40 to 50 percent of the population lives in poverty. Nationally, real unemployment is 16 percent, and millions of people face the loss of their jobs and homes. The present economic crisis is only exacerbating this social disaster, with the corporations and banks seeing it as an opportunity to destroy jobs and permanently reduce living standards.

The capitalist system is bankrupt and beyond reform. It must be replaced by socialism, i.e., a society democratically controlled by the working class, based on production for social need not private profit. The defense of public education must be linked to a struggle for social equality and the redistribution of wealth. Conditions of genuine equality can be secured, however, only by breaking the stranglehold of the financial oligarchy through the transformation of the major corporations and banks into publicly owned utilities under workers’ control.

There is no easy solution to the crisis. Teachers and school employees are locked in a *political struggle* that cannot be waged successfully within the confines of a trade union outlook and support for the profit system and the Democratic Party.

The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers to form independent committees of struggle today. Join the SEP and help build a socialist movement of workers in the US and around the world.

SEP Public Meeting: A new strategy for the working class

Tuesday, September 8 • 7 PM

**Wayne State University • General Lectures Building • Room 150
Warren Ave. & Anthony Wayne Drive**

Contact the Socialist Equality Party: **sep@socialistequality.com**