Detroit school board demands sweeping concessions from teachers

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With classes scheduled to begin next week, Detroit's newly appointed school board and its chief executive officer are pressing for sweeping concessions from the district's 7,700 teachers, including the lengthening of the school day and school year, and the introduction of a merit-pay system. The teachers' current contract expires August 30, the day before 180,000 students are scheduled to return to classrooms.

The city's political, media and business establishment is exerting considerable pressure on the leadership of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and its members to accept what amounts to an ultimatum. The schools CEO David Adamany recently declared, “There can't be any reform unless there are significant changes in the union contract. I want to hear at the negotiating table how to make things possible, not what we cannot do.” Other officials have accused teachers of standing in the way of change by rejecting the board's demands.

Last March the Michigan legislature passed a school reform bill sponsored by Republican Governor John Engler, which put the schools under the direction of Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer. Archer, a Democrat, dissolved the elected school board and appointed a new board, which includes representatives more closely tied to the city's business interests, including a vice-president of DaimlerChrysler Corp.

On Wednesday, the *Detroit Free Press* published a comment from Archer entitled, “Join together for Detroit schools,” expressing the mayor's commitment to the school reform plan and his confidence that school employee unions will comply with its aims.

Many rank-and-file teachers have expressed opposition to the board's demands, during meetings with Adamany and in protests organized by the DFT. Hundreds have joined informational pickets demanding reduced class sizes, higher wages and other improvements.

A 1994 Michigan law, however, virtually prohibits teachers from striking. If Detroit teachers walked out—as they did last in 1992, for 20 days—they would be fined one day's pay for every day on strike. Moreover, the school board has recently hired 900 new teachers as a potential strike-breaking force in the event of a walkout.

The DFT has termed the board's demands “regressive” and is continuing to negotiate for a settlement by Monday's deadline. A mass membership meeting is scheduled for Monday morning. But teachers should expect no lead from the DFT and its long-time president, John Elliott, who politically endorsed the takeover by Archer.

Elliott and other union officials are reportedly moving toward a deal in which the unions would agree to a five-year contract in exchange for a pledge by Archer's school board that it will continue to work with the labor bureaucracy. The union officials have complained that despite their years of imposing concessions on their members the school board was moving to circumvent them through privatization and other means.

The DFT leadership's calculations, however, have gone awry. Adamany, with the backing of substantial political and business interests, is demanding a complete capitulation by the unions that will greatly diminish their role in school affairs. He may also be seeking to provoke a strike that he hopes to crush quickly, and, in the end, attain the same results.

Last month Adamany issued a “preliminary school improvement plan” that met with an enthusiastic response by city officials, big business and the news media. His proposals include:

* Add 11 days to the school year; four days for classroom instruction and seven days for teacher training.

* Lengthen the teacher's work day from an average of seven hours to 8 1/2 hours. Teachers point out that they already work longer than an eight-hour day, given that they take work home.

* Merit pay for teachers, principals and support staff in schools that meet district student attendance and test score targets.

* Supplementary budget allocation for schools that meet attendance and test score targets. The District reserves the right to close “non-performing schools” and replace them with charter schools run by the Detroit Public Schools.

* If cost-effective, privatize such services as human resources, building maintenance, custodial services, food and transportation. Before contracting out, Adamany wants the district to employ the “public enterprise model that allows the district's own employees to bid for the work and become the contractor of choice if price and quality are competitive.”

The new school board picked Adamany, the former president of Wayne State University (WSU) from 1982 to 1997, as

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“interim chief executive officer” last May. If there was any doubt among teachers about the content of school reform, they should be dispelled by examining Adamany's career as an opponent of workers' rights, a spokesman for big business and political ally of Governor Engler's assault on public education.

During the 15 years he ran Detroit's top university, Adamany slashed clerical and support staff jobs by more than a third, replaced full-time faculty with part-time instructors, introduced merit-pay schemes and privatized a wide array of services. His actions provoked three strikes, including a month-long walkout by faculty workers in 1988. Adamany declared the strike illegal and ordered picketers arrested. By the 1990s, however, Adamany had come to an accommodation with the unions, including the United Auto Workers, to set up labor-management committees to increase productivity and continue downsizing.

Adamany is a former member of the board of directors of the WSU-affiliated Detroit Medical Center, which has recently wiped out hundreds of workers' jobs. He currently sits on the board of two corporations, including Caraco Pharmaceutical Laboratories. He is closely aligned with Governor Engler, who appointed Adamany to the Civil Service Commission in 1996 where he has been active in drafting statutes to undermine the conditions of Michigan public employees. During his 1993 State of the State Address, Engler singled out Adamany and WSU for “breaking the mold” and establishing Michigan's first charter public school in Detroit.

A growing number of Detroit-area corporations have expressed their dismay over a school system that produces many students who can barely read and write, and hence require expensive retraining when they enter the work force. Under conditions of a growing labor shortage, corporate Detroit became dissatisfied with the performance of the old school board whose members were notorious for petty patronage concerns, kickbacks and other forms of corruption.

A series of financial scandals, coupled with deteriorating conditions, made the former school board the target of protests by parents, school employees and students, that threatened to spill over into wider unrest over social conditions in Detroit. Big business in the city was concerned, moreover, that such a discredited board would be unable to impose the cutbacks they were demanding in the current round of negotiations with unions representing 20,000 school employees.

City and state officials have adopted the demand for school “reform” in order to channel the growing discontent over deteriorating public schools behind proposals that will not only undermine school employees' conditions, but ultimately diminish the right of working class youth to public education.

Like their counterparts in Chicago, Cleveland, Washington, DC and other districts where similar takeovers occurred, the Detroit authorities make a point not to attribute the school crisis to the debilitating social problems facing inner-city youth or the years of budget-cutting that have bled these school systems dry. On the contrary, they reject as “too costly” any suggestion of restoring the years of budget cuts in education, housing and health care that have financed the tax breaks for big business.

Engler, Archer and Adamany suggest that higher test scores, better attendance levels and graduation rates can be obtained by making school employees “more accountable.” This translates to squeezing more productivity from workers and forcing public schools to compete for funds with semi-private and private schools. Adamany recently blamed the “distress” in the Detroit schools on the “unacceptable numbers [of teachers, principals, support staff and students] who are making little effort and are producing few acceptable results.”

Hand-in-hand with eliminating school employees' rights will be the creation of a climate of fear and law-and-order repression aimed at making parents and students “more accountable” too. These include the establishment of a “military-style” high school and middle school for “disruptive students,” mandating school uniforms for all students over the next three years and holding parents responsible for unruly and truant students, including possibly throwing them in jail or having social services take their children.

The reactionary character of big business-sponsored school reform is quickly being revealed to teachers. But opposition to Adamany's demands cannot be restricted to a limited trade union struggle. The fight to defend teachers' conditions is bound up with the struggle to defend public education from the attack of big business and both of its political parties. This is only possible on the basis of a political strategy that challenges the capitalist market and places the needs of working people first—including the demand for the resources needed to guarantee a high-quality, public education to all youth.

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