

The political issues facing Detroit teachers

Socialist Equality Party
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As Detroit teachers prepare for possible strike action they are well aware that they are facing a fundamental attack on working conditions, living standards and the very principle of public education.

The most critical factor in the ability to defeat the concerted attack by the political establishment in Detroit and Michigan, which includes both parties and the news media, is an understanding of the political issues that are contained in this struggle.

The school board's demand for the lengthening of the school year and school day without additional compensation is an attempt to impose the crisis of the schools on the backs of the teachers. This would amount to a massive wage cut that would have been unthinkable ten years ago. District CEO David Adamany also wants to introduce a merit pay system that will leave teachers' salary levels to the whim of administrators.

At the heart of the school board's demands is the proposal to reorganize education along the principle of the capitalist market. The proposal to close "failing" schools and replace them with charter schools is aimed at undermining the very idea of public education. Can there be any doubt that the schools which fall behind in this "survival of the fittest" struggle will be those in the most impoverished working class neighborhoods, where teachers and students alike face the most difficult challenges?

Under these proposals the basic democratic principle, that the government must guarantee every child free, high-quality education, is being abandoned. Instead the preponderance of resources and funds will flow to those schools and staff that serve better-off layers of the student population. The net result will be an increase in the already appalling levels of inequality that exist in the schools.

This attack has been carefully prepared. The passage of strike-breaking laws by the Michigan legislature

gives the state legal power to impose massive fines not only against the teachers union, but against individual teachers. The school board has been reorganized under the banner of "reform."

Teachers going into struggle should have no illusions: they face the biggest fight in their history. They must be prepared for a media campaign denouncing them as "obstacles to change" and the imposition fines by the state.

Unfortunately, going into this struggle, the teachers' own organization, the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), has done nothing to prepare them and has no perspective to wage a determined fight. The DFT is politically allied to one of the chief conspirators in this attack, Mayor Dennis Archer and the Democratic Party. Second, as the record of the DFT and its president, John Elliott, shows, they have no intention of taking the most elementary steps to win, such as calling upon workers throughout the Detroit area to mobilize in support of the teachers and fight any fines or other legal attacks against them. As for the DFT's parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, it has already accepted many of the policies that Adamany is demanding.

The most critical issue facing teachers and all working people is the need to elaborate an entirely new strategy to defend basic democratic rights, including the right to public education. The whole perspective of the AFL-CIO and the teachers unions has proven to be a failure. As we all know the labor leaders support President Clinton and the Democrats. Just two days ago, on the eve of this struggle, Clinton devoted his weekly address to pledge federal support for charter schools. The fact that both parties are hostile to the basic needs of the vast majority of people, including public education, is becoming increasingly obvious to every thinking worker.

A new strategy for working people is necessary

because the attack on democratic rights is growing. This goes hand in hand with the growing inequality in America, the enrichment of the wealthy elite and the open corruption of the political process by big money. A fundamental conflict exists between the profit requirements of the financial and corporate oligarchy that runs America and the basic needs of the masses of people. This problem cannot be addressed simply on the level of trade union action, even the most militant, as necessary as this is.

A critique of society and a strategy to restructure it is required. No one can argue that America does not have the resources to drastically increase funding for education. A dozen or so CEOs from Michigan's Fortune 500 companies have incomes equal to a substantial portion of Detroit's educational budget. The Big Three auto makers spend more on advertising than the motor city spends on education. The stock market is hitting record highs, enormous personal fortunes are being amassed and Washington and Lansing are reporting budget surpluses—and yet, the political establishment and the media say there is no money for schools. Obviously they take the public for fools.

The problem is, under this system, working people have no representation. The economic system is monopolized by a privileged elite, which, by virtue of its ownership and control of society's resources, also monopolizes political power. Teachers and working people have no real control over the issues that directly affect their lives. The one force capable of redressing this situation is the working class, which needs to build a political party of its own, committed to genuine democracy, equality and the restructuring of society so that the wealth produced by working people is used to benefit the vast majority.

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