

Mass meeting overrules union leaders

Detroit teachers launch strike

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Detroit teachers voted Monday morning to go on strike, rejecting the recommendation of Detroit Federation of Teachers officials that they continue working under a 10-day contract extension.

The mass meeting of thousands of teachers erupted in rebellion when DFT President John Elliott ignored teachers' protests and attempted to hurry through a voice vote on strike action. Teachers feared Elliott would declare that the voice vote showed insufficient support to mandate a walkout.

Rank and file teachers took control of floor microphones and called for a division of the house, urging all in favor of a strike to walk to one side of the meeting hall. An overwhelming majority of the teachers crossed over and began chanting, "No contract, no work."

After years of being held back by the union leadership, while their working conditions worsened and their schools continued to deteriorate—their anger and frustration compounded by school officials, politicians and media commentators who blamed them for the schools crisis—the teachers decided they had no choice but to take a stand. They did so in the face of strike-breaking laws and the threat of massive fines.

As one teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Many teachers thought that the union had organized a sellout because of the proposed 10-day extension. They are proposing to take away all the rights we have. If we had accepted the extension, then they would have been able to do anything to us."

After the strike vote teachers went to the Detroit Schools Center to carry out mass picketing. Hundreds surrounded the building, carrying signs demanding "No rollbacks" and calling for smaller class sizes, more textbooks and supplies and other improvements. A DFT official who rebuked the teachers for voting to

strike was confronted by pickets, who denounced him for selling them out.

The walkout, the first by teachers since their 20-day strike in 1992, forced school officials to announce the cancellation of the first day of school for the district's 172,000 students. The new CEO of the Detroit school system, David Adamany, raised the possibility of a back-to-work injunction, but said he had no immediate plans to seek one.

Adamany said schools would remain open and students would be sent back once a sufficient number of teachers returned to instruct them. He added that school authorities were "studying" the 1994 Michigan law that penalizes school employees for striking.

The schools CEO and the district's newly appointed school board are demanding sweeping concessions from teachers, including the extension of the school day and school year without compensation, the introduction of a merit-pay system, and new procedures to make it easier to fire teachers. Adamany is also seeking the power to close "non-performing" schools and replace them with charter schools.

The board, which includes representatives of corporations such as DaimlerChrysler, was appointed by Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer, who took over the schools following the passage of a school bill backed by Republican Governor John Engler. After the teachers walked out, Archer, a Democrat, echoed Adamany's charge that the strike is a threat to so-called "school reform." The DFT is closely aligned with Archer, having supported him in the take-over of the schools.

The clash between the teachers and the union officials was evident from the start of Monday's mass meeting, when Elliott declared there would be a two-minute limit for comments from the floor and refused to

answer questions as he read off a list of items to which the union had tentatively agreed. He echoed the school board's positions, saying "unsatisfactory" teachers should be fired, blaming teachers for "excessive absenteeism," backing the board's demand to eliminate annual pay increases for teachers who miss nine days of work, and justifying the board's plan to close "failing" schools on the grounds that "the same thing is done in other states."

When it came to the issue of reduced class sizes, Elliott reported the union had agreed to the board's proposal to "study the issue." This evoked loud jeers from the audience.

Elliott brought forward the union's legal counsel to intimidate the teachers by citing Michigan laws against teachers' strikes. "If you strike," the lawyer said, "you can be fired."

A high school teacher, speaking from the floor, replied, "When Rosa Parks stood up she defied the law that ordered blacks to sit in the back of the bus. Now our union is saying there is a nice comfortable seat in the back of the bus for us."

Other teachers denounced the fact that more money was being spent on jails than on schools and said the board's "reform" proposals would be used to bring in charter schools and destroy teachers' seniority rights.

WSWS reporters spoke with teachers after the strike vote meeting and later as they picketed the schools center building. A Mumford High School teacher said, "Since the 1940s, and then with McCarthyism, the unions lost touch with their role as leaders for social justice. Now they're just interested in saving their butts.

"You can't apply the capitalist model to the education of children. The concept is: those who can't compete get locked out of business. But what do they propose to do with poor children? Just like the stratification in society, there's stratification in education. It parallels the widening gap between the rich and poor. They are providing a substandard education to poor children. That's the way I teach it in my classes, and the students are pretty hip to it. By and large, I think the parents will support us and keep their kids out of school."

Another teacher said, "Education is a vehicle for social transformation, but it is under attack. How can they get \$4.8 million in three days from casinos but say they don't have enough money for textbooks and teachers' salaries? Now they want to run the schools

like a business. I worked in a factory. As a teacher I'm not pushing something up an assembly line. These are human beings and they can't be handled like that. They need a creative agenda to develop."

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