

New York City teacher comments on the Detroit school strike

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To the editor:

I would like to point out the compelling similarity between the issues facing the Detroit teachers in their courageous strike and those in New York City, where I teach.

In New York City as in Detroit, the government and school board are trying to increase the school day and year. This is being done under the misnamed slogan of "raising standards". Really teaching to a higher standard would require spending the money to build more classrooms and hiring the teachers, paraprofessionals and guidance personnel needed to work with students on their individual academic and social needs, in classes with much smaller pupil-teacher ratios.

In New York City a majority of students are reading below grade level by the sixth grade. At Brandeis High School, 20 percent of the students come in reading below grade level. This school, in a gentrified Manhattan neighborhood, is over capacity by 800 to 1,000 students because there are no other general admission schools built for the area. Many of the students are English-as-a-second-language immigrants with low literacy in their own language. Some students have problems of their home environment that challenge most adults. The widespread health problems of poverty areas, the cuts in health and welfare programs, the need to work, the resulting inconsistent attendance, make it difficult to focus on studying for many who do not have someone at home capable of helping them with academic problems....

Perhaps because New York City, with a million students, is seven times as large as the Detroit school district, the New York City Board of Education has not yet fully applied the ramrod approach being experienced in Detroit. It has prepared the way toward that end in stages.

Under the last contract, the New York school board claimed to free teachers from non-teaching assignments, such as cafeteria and hall duty. However, they did not hire the personnel that would allow schools to function without paraprofessionals and volunteer teachers continuing in those duties. The exception is an increase of uniformed security guards which develops a prison atmosphere. Now in the upcoming contract negotiations, the board can be expected to demand that the "professional" period, which teachers are expected to use for specific instructionally related, approved tasks, become an additional instructional period. This would of course be detrimental to the time needed for preparing lessons, marking homework and tests, tutoring students, calling parents, conferencing with teachers, participating in extracurricular

activities, and endless administrative paperwork.

More boldly, 43 poorly performing schools have been taken over by Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew. Since much of the New York school system can be said to be failing, a precedent for the entire city is being established. Teachers who wanted to stay at those schools were required to agree to work 40 minutes more each day and start the school year a week early. The teachers who volunteered are being given a 15 percent wage increase, for a 20 percent increase in their instruction time from five to six periods. This is dependent on their remaining in the program three years. Eight hundred unlicensed teachers are being removed as part of the changes. Two weeks before the start of the New York school year, there were replacements for only half of them. This was despite the fact that the increases added to pension levels of those near retirement. There were also masters degree scholarships of \$2,500 for the three years....

If the teacher-pupil ratio were small enough to begin with, these students would not need extended time. Chancellor Crew has promised to reduce the kindergarten through third grade class size to 20 students and fourth through eighth grade to 25 students in poorly performing schools. His effort may be jeopardized by the 21,000 students, 60 percent, assigned to go to summer school but who still failed to be promoted under Crew's new policy of no "social promotion".

In addition, the difficulty of filling teaching vacancies is part of a nationwide shortage of qualified, licensed teachers, especially in math, science and special education. By 2007, population growth will require 300,000 more teachers, raising the total from 3 million to 3.3 million. Retirements mean there will be a need for 2 million more teachers. In New York City alone, 17,000 teachers will be eligible to retire after this school year.

This intensifies the need of school boards to squeeze all the productivity they can out of their work force. The WSWs statements demonstrate the connections to big business of the Detroit board and city government. In New York, several members of the City Council have assets far in excess of \$1 million. Despite the fact that they are allowed to retain full-time jobs, with many making more than \$100,000, there is a proposal for a 27.6 percent wage increase to raise Council salaries from \$70,500 to \$90,000. The Wall Street bull market has especially benefited the 16 City Council members who own more than \$100,000 in stocks.

The capitalist politicians in New York and Detroit have ripped education with budget cuts. The extent of the damage was exposed in a report this year by the Citizens Budget Commission. The

percentage of overcrowded New York public schools which were operating above capacity rose from 48 percent in 1990 to 55 percent in 1998, with 68 percent of high schools overcrowded. The Chancellor has stated that there is progress in the last year with the building of eight new schools. However, the greatest number of new seats have been in transportable classrooms placed on school grounds or in leased spaces....

The level of funding also restricted installation of modern technology. New York City has a ratio of 13 students per computer which does not even meet the board's standard of 8:1 in elementary schools and 6:1 in high schools.

Just as the Detroit teachers had to move a strike in opposition to their union leadership, New York teachers have been victimized by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) bureaucracy which has aided the attacks on teachers. President Randi Weingarten was hand picked by Sandra Feldman when she moved on from the UFT to become president of the national union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Weingarten negotiated the 1995 contract which teachers first voted down but was later pushed through. It was a similar concession contract to that given the city workers in DC 37, for which union leaders were charged with vote-rigging. Weingarten then was chosen to head the Municipal Labor Council which helped carry out damage control for the city labor bureaucracy.

Without consulting the teachers at a Bronx school, Weingarten proposed that the UFT take responsibility for turning around the school. To her chagrin, she discovered opposition to her program which included a longer school day and year.

The extended school year and day for the 43 schools taken over by Chancellor Crew was negotiated by Weingarten. It was announced in a newspaper only one day before teachers finished the school year, effectively killing any possible discussion and opposition. Her recent letter to membership makes clear that she accepts the idea of education as a business. "The stakes were pretty clear: The alternative for these schools was closure or state takeover (akin to a business in bankruptcy) and for the staff, involuntary reassignments." Even with a shortage of teachers, Weingarten tries to use a threat of layoffs to get a concession accepted as a victory. She states, "so at the same time that principals and superintendents from all over the city were being fired, we achieved some choice and real benefits for our members and students by working out this agreement."

Acceptance of merit pay, another fraudulent school "reform," is being demanded of Detroit teachers. It is also being introduced in New York by the recent agreement with the Board of Education. Against a consistent union policy against merit pay, the teachers of the "extended-time schools" will be the divisive wedge by which some teachers will be paid less than others, depending on productivity....

New York City teachers want parity with the surrounding suburbs where the pay scale is \$10,000 dollars higher. The Corporate bosses would like to see a continuation of the trend that has allowed them to enrich themselves. According to data from a government survey, the 1998 average teacher salary increases are among the smallest in 40 years while teachers' relative standard of living is the lowest in 40 years. The share of school budgets going

to teacher salaries is the lowest in 30 years. Driving down real wages is a necessary cost-cutting measure connected to the drive for privatization of public education. It is needed to insure profitability for the corporations that are staking out their claims on the abundant funds in education....

A further comparison can be found in the anti-strike legislation that imposes penalties on striking teachers in Michigan. It is a reflection of the older New York Taylor Law. Its purpose is to bludgeon down those teachers who would show similar courage in New York. These laws show that teachers in both states face the need for a political struggle that unites them with other workers and parents.

The support of parents for the striking Detroit educators is a far cry from the reaction of the bureaucrats in their own union. As of today I found not a word of the Detroit strike on either the AFT or UFT web site. These are not leaders who will unite labor behind the Detroit teachers. In fact, they did not even announce the "early" Labor Day rally held September 2 in New York. Instead of the 100,000 marchers that they used to have, the union bureaucrats could only muster 10,000....

Reliance on and support for the politicians of the twin parties of big business has been the hallmark of the AFT. Sandra Feldman and Randi Weingarten may be too busy to speak up for the Detroit strikers but they have made an early endorsement of Al Gore. Gore will be sure to follow in the footsteps of Clinton who pledged federal support for charter schools. But with the tens of millions of dollars in campaign funds that Gore has received from the leaders of the corporate world, his footprints will not be left on the Detroit picket line.

In comparing Detroit and New York, the need for a common strategy by teachers everywhere is underscored. Articles on the *World Socialist Web Site* often show parents, students and teachers facing the same struggles throughout the United States and in countries throughout the world. This fact itself confirms the *WSWS* analysis of the need for a political struggle that challenges all the attacks on education at their common root. Teachers and all workers need to take their own independent road and unite by the building a party that fights to put an end to the crushing of education and the educators.

Fraternally,
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