

Teachers union leaders conspire to end Detroit schools strike

Walter Gilberti, Jerry White
4 September 1999

As the walkout by 7,700 Detroit teachers concludes its first week, the leadership of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) is working with city and school officials to fashion a deal that would impose the crisis of the school system on the backs of the teachers.

Over the last few days there has been a concerted effort by national union leaders and the mayor's office to rebuild the credibility of DFT President John Elliott, who was repudiated by rank-and-file teachers at a mass meeting last Monday.

Mayor Dennis Archer said Friday he expected teachers to be back in the classrooms by Wednesday at the latest. He has called for negotiations to be moved to his offices and for round-the-clock talks to reach a settlement.

City, state and school officials are holding in reserve the threat of a court injunction as well as provisions of an anti-strike law that allows them to fine each teacher one day's pay for each day on strike. School district CEO David Adamany said Thursday, "We've got a few days of negotiations left before Labor Day. But let me say this: There will come a point where the strike will become so damaging, where it will be the responsibility of the school district to take every legal step available to resolve the strike."

The Michigan Employment Relations Commission, the agency responsible for imposing the penalties, has already set up a fact-finding panel.

The strike began August 30 with a revolt against the DFT leadership. Thousands of teachers overruled Elliott's recommendation for a 10-day contract extension and voted to strike against the school board's regressive demands. These include merit pay, a longer school day and school year without additional compensation, a punitive absentee policy and a plan to close "failing schools" and replace them with charter schools.

If the authorities have decided to delay direct state intervention, it is mainly because the teachers have won

widespread public support. The strike has been solid and the board has been forced to drop its plans to reopen the schools.

Despite vitriolic denunciations of the teachers by the Detroit news media, the majority of parents, students and workers see the teachers as defenders of public education against the so-called "reform" school board. Non-teaching school employees, including school bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria workers, principals and others, are facing the threat of privatization and other concessions, and have backed the teachers even though the school board is moving to lay them off because of the strike.

The strike to date has been effective, but it would be a fatal mistake for teachers to believe that their struggle will be victorious if it continues along the present course. Besides the media and the power of the state, the forces arrayed against them have as their most critical asset the leadership of the DFT.

Archer and Adamany have decided for the present to rely on Elliott and the DFT leadership to wear down the teachers' resistance and push through a contract that includes the district's main demands. Fines, injunctions and other measures are to be held in reserve, while the union leadership uses the threat of their imposition to intimidate the rank and file and insist they have no choice but to end the strike.

Sandra Feldman, president of the national union, the American Federation of Teachers, made an appearance in Detroit on Friday for the purpose of shoring up Elliott's position. She and the entire union bureaucracy stand in the same camp with Archer, Adamany and Republican Governor John Engler when it comes to suppressing rank-and-file opposition to the DFT leadership.

She spoke at a rally in front of the Schools Center Building attended by thousands of strikers. While the teachers turned out to oppose the district's concessions demands and press their fight for smaller class sizes,

Feldman set the tone by striking up a chant, “Who is our leader?—John Elliott!”

Feldman, like Elliott (who is a vice-president of the AFT), is a supporter of “reconstituting” so-called failed schools, one of the central policies demanded by the Detroit school board. This involves closing down targeted schools, dispersing their staff and forcing teachers to reapply for their jobs. In her first speech as AFT president in 1997 Feldman shocked many teachers by declaring that the union had to play an active role in closing “failed” schools.

Mayor Archer on Thursday praised Elliott as a “skillful negotiator” and said Monday's strike vote did not express the will of the teachers. Archer's comments echo the efforts of a section of the DFT bureaucracy and the news media, which has attempted to launch a witch-hunt against the Members Action Caucus, an opposition group within the DFT that pressed for strike action.

The most vicious enemies of the teachers are posing as defenders of “unity,” by which they mean the subordination of the teachers to the treacherous leadership of the DFT. Chris Zavis, the leader of another dissident faction in the union, offered his services in this effort by proposing to join Elliott at the bargaining table.

Little has been reported about the details of the negotiations, but one thing can be said with certainty. Elliott is acting not as an advocate of the teachers, but rather as a co-conspirator with Archer, Engler and the school authorities. Teachers need only ask themselves one question: how can Elliott and the rest of the union leadership claim to defend their interests when they are allied with Archer and the Democratic Party, which conspired with Governor Engler to put Adamany and the new school board in power?

One fact that has been reported about the talks reveals Elliott's real role. The *Detroit Free Press* reported Tuesday that the DFT has agreed to allow aides and other non-teaching personnel to work longer days, in order to staff after-school programs. This is a huge concession, which abandons the long-standing principle that only teachers could perform such functions.

With this agreement, the union is writing off any fight for the school authorities to expand educational programs by hiring more teachers. At the same time the DFT is backing the efforts of the board to compel lower-paid school employees to work extra hours. This makes a mockery of solidarity among school workers, and can only weaken the position of the teachers. It also sets a precedent that will be used, sooner rather than later, to

impose on teachers the board's demand for an extension of the school day, without compensation.

The school officials are not budging on their major demands for merit pay, school “reconstitution,” and withholding seniority pay increases on the grounds of “excess” absenteeism. As for the teachers' main demand for smaller classes, Elliott has defended the school board's position. He was quoted this week as saying that “it's too late this year to work out related issues like shifting students between crowded and under-populated schools.” He declared further that teachers were mistaken in their complaints about inadequate textbooks and supplies.

Over the next few days the effort to force teachers to accept the board's demands will be intensified. City, school and union officials will use deception and outright lies to present a false picture of any deal that is reached; threats of injunctions and fines will be stepped up; efforts will be made to rally the most conservative sections of teachers.

The stage is being set for the calling of a new membership meeting early next week, at which teachers will be told the union leadership has won a “great victory.” At the same time Elliott will seek to intimidate the rank and file, telling teachers they must accept the board's offer or face the full brunt of the law.

The teachers cannot win their struggle simply by maintaining strong picket lines. Political lessons must be drawn from the lineup of politicians, Democratic and well as Republican, the news media and the union bureaucracy against them. For this struggle to be successful, teachers must break free of the straitjacket of the DFT and lead a struggle for the industrial and political mobilization of the entire working class of Detroit in defense of public education.

This article is available as a PDF leaflet for download and distribution



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)