

# Union leaders betray Detroit teachers' strike: new strategy needed to defend public education

The Editorial Board  
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The contract being presented by the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) as a “victory” is, in fact, a wholesale capitulation to the main demands of the school board and city and state officials. For teachers, meeting Wednesday morning to vote on the union's recommendation for a return to work, acceptance of the contract will mean opening the door to severe attacks, not only against themselves, but against public education as a whole.

Teachers should reject this agreement and maintain the strike. However, a mere continuation of the struggle along the previous course cannot defeat the forces lined up against the teachers and reverse the attacks on their conditions and those of their students.

It is necessary to take stock of the role of the DFT. From the moment rank-and-file teachers overruled DFT President John Elliott and launched the strike on August 30, the DFT leaders have been conspiring with the school authorities, Mayor Dennis Archer and Governor John Engler to get the teachers back to work and impose a contract with sweeping concessions.

Contract provisions reported thus far demonstrate that the union has ignored the critical issues over which the teachers struck.

\* The school board's demand for merit pay has simply been removed from the province of contract negotiations, but Detroit schools CEO David Adamany has announced he will proceed with the proposal and turn to the Michigan Employment Relations Commission to have it imposed on the teachers.

\* Punitive measures to deny teachers their annual pay increases on grounds of “excessive” absenteeism remain intact. Thousands of teachers with accumulated days off will be unable to use them.

\* The proposal to lower classroom sizes over the next two years at 44 out of the district's 171 elementary schools will do little to relieve chronic overcrowding. Elliott has endorsed the refusal of the school authorities and politicians to allocate the funds needed to hire the new teachers needed to substantially reduce class sizes.

\* Yearly salary increases of 4 percent for teachers with a master's degree and 2 percent for the rest barely keeps up with the rate of inflation and will do little to stop the erosion of teachers' living standards or attract quality instructors to the district.

\* In exchange for taking the eight-and-a-half-hour day off of the table, the union has reportedly agreed to allow aides and other non-teaching personnel to work longer days, in order to staff after-school programs. By abandoning the long-standing principle that only teachers could perform such functions, the union is writing off any fight for the school authorities to expand education programs by hiring more teachers.

\* The union has already agreed to the “reconstitution” of schools, site-based management and other regressive demands that will erode conditions and further undermine the principle of public education by fostering charter and for-profit schools.

Elliott and the DFT leadership have led teachers to a dead end. Predictably, they are presenting teachers with the ultimatum of either ending the strike and accepting the school board's terms or facing fines and other state attacks. For its part, the Membership Action Caucus (MAC) offers no viable alternative. They claim that all teachers need to do to win their struggle is to continue the walkout, and that the threat of state intervention is merely a bluff.

Such claims are false to the core. Should the teachers

reject the union's recommendation and continue the strike, they will rapidly face the imposition of fines and the likelihood of court injunctions. MAC is encouraging illusions which leave teachers unprepared for the attacks they face, because they seek to obscure the profound political issues that underlie the strike.

Both political parties have demonstrated their hostility to the teachers' struggle. The Democrats, whom Elliott and the AFL-CIO leaders claim are "friends of labor," have shown themselves to be no less opposed to the needs of teachers and students than the Republicans. Vice President Al Gore marked the Labor Day weekend by visiting Detroit last Sunday, and went out of his way to disassociate himself from the teachers' struggle, refusing to even mention the strike.

As for Archer and his deputy mayor, School Board Chairman Freman Hendrix, they have made it clear that they are prepared to intervene if the walkout continues and join Engler and the Republican legislature in imposing strike-breaking measures.

The Democrats, like the Republicans, demand that public education be subordinated to the needs of big business. The school "reform" measures they propose have nothing to do with restoring the hundreds of millions of dollars that have been cut from the school budget over the last two decades, or revoking the tax abatements and other corporate handouts that have gutted the tax base of the Detroit schools. On the contrary, they blame the teachers for the crisis of public education and advance proposals that will further divert resources from the public schools to corporate profits and the fortunes of the wealthy.

Engler, Archer, Adamany, Elliott and the news media all claim that there is no money to meet the teachers' demands for substantially reduced class sizes, more textbooks and supplies and decent wages. This in the midst of the biggest stock market boom in history, when the federal and state governments are boasting of budget surpluses, America's richest 1 percent is accumulating unheard-of wealth, and Archer is overseeing a multibillion-dollar program to build casinos and sports stadiums!

The real issue—which is never publicly discussed—is who controls the wealth of society, which is created by the labor of working people, and who decides how it is to be allocated. Only when workers organize a mass, independent political movement and assert their own

social and class interests can the economic and political monopoly of big business be broken and society reorganized along genuinely egalitarian and democratic principles.

Then, and only then, will the enormous wealth of society be marshaled to provide high quality public schools for all youth—regardless of social status, income level or race—and other urgent social needs—healthcare, housing, full employment—be met.

If teachers vote to reject this agreement, the first thing they must do is take the conduct of this struggle out of the hands of the DFT and fight to mobilize the industrial and political strength of the Detroit-area working class against the inevitable retaliation of the state. Rank-and-file committees must be set up to fight for support from auto workers, Teamsters, city and school employees, white collar workers, unemployed workers, parents, youth and students throughout the city. This must be the first step in organizing a political struggle to defend and greatly expand public education.

Teachers who have read the analyses presented by the *World Socialist Web Site* have seen that our assessment of the role of the union and the politicians has been confirmed. From the beginning of this struggle we have said that teachers must break free of the stranglehold of the DFT and fight to develop an independent political movement of the working class. Regardless of the outcome of today's meeting, we urge teachers to continue reading our web site, send their comments to our editorial board and join a dialog on the development of a new political strategy for the working class.

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