

Detroit teachers end nine-day strike

Jerry White
9 September 1999

Striking Detroit teachers voted Wednesday to return to work under an extension of their old contract while a mail ballot is held on a tentative three-year agreement reached by the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and school officials. The overwhelming vote to end the nine-day walkout took place at a mass meeting of more than 8,000 teachers.

The vote was not an endorsement of the new pact, which most teachers realize contains many of the regressive demands against which they struck. Instead many teachers who had enthusiastically supported the walkout last week voted to return to work because they sensed it was futile to continue the struggle under a leadership that was opposed to the strike. Few teachers believed the union would defend them if state authorities began imposing fines under a Michigan law that bans teacher strikes.

The strike began on August 30 when rank-and-file teachers at a mass meeting rejected by a large margin the DFT's recommendation for a 10-day extension of the old contract. Since then DFT President John Elliott has worked in tandem with Mayor Dennis Archer, Governor John Engler and the school authorities to get the teachers back to work.

The media in Detroit launched a strident campaign against the teachers, branding strike advocates as "radicals" who did not speak for the membership. Both Democratic and Republican politicians portrayed the teachers as opponents of school "reform." But despite the anti-teacher propaganda, there was widespread support for the teachers among working people in Detroit.

The political establishment concluded early on it would have to rely on the DFT to sap the militancy of the teachers and engineer an end to the strike. The media and city officials rallied behind the DFT leadership, which, for its part, appealed to the more senior and conservative sections of the union

membership to turn out for Wednesday's meeting.

At the meeting the union leadership encouraged an atmosphere of intimidation against those who wished to continue the walkout. Supporters of the union bureaucracy were given ample time to praise the agreement and laud the negotiating team, while opponents were menaced and interrupted when they attempted to speak from the floor. A DFT sergeant-at-arms snatched the microphone away from one teacher who was arguing for a continuation of the strike.

Asked later by a reporter whether he had "stacked the meeting," Elliott said, "That's the name of the game. You got to get the votes."

Predictably, the union officials claimed they had won a victory for the teachers. But schools CEO David Adamany said the contract contained "two-thirds" of his proposals for "employee accountability." School board member William Beckman added, "This will allow us to make individual teachers accountable, especially if they are not doing well."

Under the terms of a letter of agreement on the "reconstitution of schools," the district can now close a "failing" school, reopen it and decide which teachers will be retained and which will be transferred. The contract further undermines tenure provisions by allowing the district to fire a "non-performing" teacher after a review period of one school year, as opposed to the two years in the current contract.

School authorities successfully imposed a more punitive absentee policy, allowing the district to eliminate annual pay raises for teachers who use more than eight of their fifteen allotted sick days. One result of this cave-in by the union is that teachers will no longer be able to use sick days accumulated over years of service. Nor will they be able to take what one teacher called "mental health" days, needed to recover from poor working conditions and overcrowded classrooms.

The board rejected the teachers' main demand for a substantial and immediate reduction in class sizes. The board will make no changes this year, and over the following two years will begin to lower class sizes at 44 of the district's 171 elementary schools. Nothing will be done about overcrowding in the remaining 100 middle and high schools, where class sizes reach 40 or more.

The district also removed its earlier offer to provide elementary school teachers with a daily preparation period, leaving it at the current three periods per week.

While the school board's demand for a district-wide merit-pay system was dropped, Adamany said he will implement it unilaterally at selected schools this year, on the basis of a state school code provision that allows districts to implement pilot programs. He also plans to appeal to the Michigan Employment Relations Commission to make merit pay a non-negotiable issue.

Teachers will vote on the contract by secret mail ballot over the next few weeks. There is substantial opposition to many contract provisions, and widespread dissatisfaction with the DFT leadership. But the contract may still be ratified, because the mass of teachers do not see a viable alternative to the policies of the Elliott leadership.

No such alternative was provided by the opposition group inside the DFT known as the Membership Action Caucus (MAC). This group claimed that the teachers had simply to continue the strike to win their demands. MAC belittled the threat of state intervention, claiming preparations to impose massive fines against individual teachers and other reprisals were merely a “bluff.”

The MAC group has aligned itself with black nationalist forces and former school board members who were removed from office earlier this year and replaced by the so-called “reform” board appointed by Mayor Archer. It sought throughout the strike to obscure the political issues underlying the attack on the teachers and public education as a whole, first and foremost the need for workers to break from the Democratic Party and build their own political party.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact