

Teachers fight to defend public education

Detroit strike exposes fraud of school "reform"

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With this week's walkout Detroit teachers have taken a courageous stand in defense of public education, defying attacks in the news media, the threat of fines and even dismissal, and the treachery of their own union, the Detroit Federation of Teachers.

Predictably, the Detroit media are slandering the teachers. The *Detroit News* and its rival, the *Free Press*, are competing with one another to print the most abusive denunciations of the strikers.

The press, radio and television commentators and politicians repeat one and the same theme: the teachers have set themselves up as obstacles to school "reform." Typical are the comments of School Board President Freman Hendrix, the former deputy mayor and a close advisor to Mayor Dennis Archer, who denounced teachers for being "anti-reform" and opponents of "change."

The word "reform" is being used as a bludgeon against the teachers, but very little is said about the content of the so-called reform policies of Republican Governor John Engler, Democratic Mayor Archer and the newly installed school board. There is a reason for this silence. If the politicians and media were to honestly lay before the public the concrete measures which they are seeking to impose in the name of "reform," there would be mass opposition.

The essence of their program is a further diversion of resources from the public schools so as to provide even greater tax breaks and other benefits to big business and the rich. Nowhere in any of their plans do the "reformers" propose to return the hundreds of millions of dollars that were cut from the school budget over the last two decades, or revoke the tax abatements and other corporate handouts that have gutted the tax base of the Detroit schools.

The basic principle of public education—that every child, regardless of income, race or social status, has a right to a decent education at the government's expense—is to be undermined by the introduction of competition between schools, which will be forced to fight over a shrinking financial pie. "Failing" schools will be closed and "unsatisfactory" teachers fired, opening the way for the introduction of charter and for-profit schools.

This introduction of capitalist market principles into the educational system will inevitably favor the better-off sections of the population. The public schools—or what is left of them after the "educational entrepreneurs" have milked the system for their personal profit—will be geared to the education of the privileged few, while the majority of working class youth, especially the most impoverished sections, will be consigned to underfunded institutions more akin to detention centers than places of learning.

The so-called reformers see the teachers as the main obstacle to their

elitist and self-serving policies. They want to deliver a blow to the teachers so they can ride roughshod over all opposition.

The teachers know very well that the so-called reform is a fraud. In going on strike they are fighting not only for their own immediate interests, but for the defense and development of public education. They are opposing a corporate and political establishment that is indifferent to the needs of the vast majority of young people and the real interests of society as a whole.

Reading the press commentary on the strike one has the sense of having landed, like Alice, in Wonderland, where reality is turned on its head. Engler, Archer, schools CEO David Adamany, the business community—these are portrayed as the "reformers," who are motivated solely by their concern for the welfare of Detroit's children.

The teachers are depicted as selfish reactionaries, concerned only for themselves and indifferent to the educational needs of their students.

But is it not the teachers who are raising the demand for smaller classes? Are not they the ones who have put their jobs and livelihoods on the line to push for more textbooks? Are they not telling the truth when they say teacher salaries—which presently start at a mere \$32,000—must be raised to attract the best possible educators?

Is it not the "reformers" who reject these demands out of hand, and whose entire "reform" program is based on continuing to starve the public school system of desperately needed funds?

It doesn't take a genius to understand that the most important prerequisite for improving education is to give the teachers more time to develop their students by reducing class sizes. This, of course, requires additional funding. The *Detroit Free Press* on Wednesday summed up the hypocrisy of the forces arrayed against the teachers when it criticized the demand for smaller classes on the grounds that it "requires hiring more teachers and building classrooms."

The media passes over in silence Adamany's demand that teachers work one and a half more hours per day, and an additional 11 days per year, without additional compensation. If calculated on an hourly basis, this amounts to a wage cut of at least 25 percent. Is there any worker in Detroit, or anywhere else, who doesn't know what such a measure would mean for himself and his family—the havoc, pain, financial, physical and emotional toll it would take?

Of course Adamany, who is being paid \$193,000 a year, is proposing no such sacrifices for himself and his fellow "reformers!"

A class conflict

The stench of hypocrisy and cynicism stretches from the state Capitol in Lansing to the mayor's office in Detroit and pervades every editorial office, TV and radio station in between. What is the essence

of the fraud being perpetrated? The concealment of the fact that the conflict between the official champions of “reform” and the teachers is a conflict between social classes.

On the one side stand Engler, Archer, the corporate executives on the school board, the political appointees, the media, and the servants of the political establishment who head the Detroit Federation of Teachers. On the other side stand the teachers, thousands of school employees, students, parents and the working people as a whole.

While the teachers may not be conscious of it, with their strike they are implicitly challenging a political and economic system that is entirely subordinated to the most privileged layers of society. The unanimous attack by the political elite and the media underscores the underlying class division that has been exposed by the teachers' action.

The vast majority of working people in Detroit instinctively sense this. In the first days of the strike teachers have won widespread support. This should not come as a great surprise. After all, it is impossible in the present situation to justify the claim, made by Adamany and his allies, that the funds needed to vastly improve the schools are nowhere to be found.

The stock market is at a record high. Corporate profits are booming. There are budget surpluses in Lansing and Washington.

The issue is not a lack of money. The issue is: who controls the wealth of society, and who decides how society's resources are to be spent.

All of those who are denouncing the teachers as enemies of reform uncritically defend an economic and political system that fosters private greed by the privileged few, at the expense of the needs of the many.

Among the corporations represented on the new school board is DaimlerChrysler. Last year five of Chrysler's top executives took in \$168 million from the merger with Daimler-Benz. For that sum, another 524 teachers could have been hired. DaimlerChrysler's representative on the school board, Executive Vice President Frank Fountain, received millions of dollars last year in salaries and bonuses.

On the same day that the teachers walked out, a report was released documenting the fact that the gap between the pay of corporate executives and the pay of workers has grown tenfold over the last 20 years. CEOs of major corporations in the US today make 419 times the average pay of their workers.

In Detroit, while students sit in overcrowded classrooms, without textbooks, Mayor Archer is overseeing a multibillion-dollar program to build casinos, sports stadiums and upscale apartments, which promise fabulous returns for corporate investors.

The public schools are being strangled to satisfy the socially destructive appetites of the ruling elite. Not even in the days of the robber barons at the end of the last century was America ruled by so rapacious a financial oligarchy.

This subordination of society to the interests of the richest 10 percent of the population is inimical to genuine democracy. In the US today, all institutions that are historically connected to principles of democracy and equality—such as the public school system—are being targeted for destruction. The attack on democratic rights goes hand in hand with the corporate-government offensive against the working class that has been under way for two decades.

These are the great social and political issues underlying the teachers strike. For public education to survive and develop, a fundamental restructuring of society along democratic and egalitarian lines is necessary. It is the masses of people who must control the

wealth produced by their own labor. They, not a wealthy elite, must democratically decide how society's resources are to be allocated. Only in this way can principles of social solidarity and scientific planning become the basis for economic and political life, rather than the selfish and anarchic pursuit of private gain.

A political struggle is needed

Precisely because the defense of public education is a class issue, it is also a political issue. Teachers and the working class as a whole must counterpose their own program to the phony reform presented by the bankers and corporate bosses and their political mouthpieces. Class sizes must be drastically reduced, the most modern learning tools such as computers and the Internet must be made available to all students. New schools must be built and old ones refurbished. Teachers' salaries, benefits and pensions must be raised to correspond to the highly skilled and critical nature of the work they perform.

Genuine educational reform, moreover, requires measures to create a social environment that can foster and sustain the intellectual and cultural development of young people. This means policies to eliminate poverty and provide decent jobs, affordable daycare, health insurance and housing for all.

To fight for such a program the working class must have its own political party. When teachers look with disgust at DFT President John Elliott, they are seeing the result of the trade union bureaucracy's alliance with the Democratic Party. The time has come for the building of a political party of the working class based on a program that represents its needs.

Precisely because the DFT is utterly opposed to such a perspective it can only play a duplicitous and back-stabbing role in the present struggle. Teachers should have no illusions: Elliott is working might and main with city and state officials and his fellow union bureaucrats in the Metro Detroit AFL-CIO to break the strike and force teachers back to work on Adamany's terms.

It is necessary for teachers to take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the DFT bureaucracy. Rank-and-file committees should be set up to turn this strike into a genuine class struggle. Teachers should fight for the mobilization of auto workers, Teamsters, city and school employees, white collar workers, unemployed workers, parents, youth and students to defend them against the legal and financial attacks they will face, including court injunctions, fines and firings. Such a struggle will take forward the building of an independent political movement of the working class to defend basic democratic rights, including the right of youth to a decent education.

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