

Teacher discusses lessons of the Detroit strike

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A teacher who took part in the recent strike by 7,000 teachers against the Detroit school board discussed with the WSWS some of the issues in this struggle.

Why did the teachers strike?

Our main demands were to improve conditions both for teaching and for learning. Wages were a secondary issue. Teachers wanted more books and supplies, as well as smaller class sizes, especially in the elementary grades. That is why we opposed the so-called reforms of CEO David Adamany and the school board.

We felt that teachers were being unfairly singled out and blamed for the crisis in the schools. We were well aware that it was the teachers—not the school board—who were fighting for the best interests of the students. Most teachers understood that the measures the board wanted to introduce would be detrimental to the young people in Detroit. I also believe that a large percentage of the general population also felt that way, and gave us heartfelt, if unarticulated, support.

In many instances, teachers have more contact with these children than even their parents. We are aware of the conditions they face and the social problems they bring to school. That is why most teachers are not taken in by the fixation with standardized test scores. This only gives a part of the picture of how students are learning, even under the best of circumstances.

The school authorities want to reconstitute failing schools. What this means is that schools could be shut down if their students do not show improved test scores. I understand that a recent report suggests that, even when a city or state takes over a school district, it takes from five to seven years for any improvements to be realized. Of course, they usually fail to mention the intractable social problems many inner city neighborhoods face. For example, the high school in Detroit with the lowest test scores in the city, Southeastern High School, is also located in the poorest neighborhood in Detroit.

Based on the test score criteria, schools will be closed despite a host of other programs that benefit student development. During the Labor Day parade, while the striking teachers were assembling, I couldn't help but notice the marching band from Spain Middle School, which has won awards for their playing. I recall saying to the teachers, not without irony, that their music was wonderful, too bad their test scores are so low. That is the way these children are viewed by Mayor Dennis Archer and Governor John Engler, the ones who hand picked Adamany.

The most thoughtful teachers suspected that Archer and Engler had a political agenda: to further dismantle public education. The imposition of a system of merit pay would have been a big step in that direction. Merit pay would pit teacher against teacher and school against school without any consideration of the extenuating circumstances teachers face, such as the broader socioeconomic problems of young people, not to mention class sizes and lack of supplies and equipment.

Teachers were right to oppose this demand. It was not included in the contract but Adamany has pledged to impose it on the teachers with or without the union's consent. The other demands were punitive in character. Adamany got the right to cancel a teacher's annual wage increase for violating the new absenteeism policy. This is absurd. Absenteeism is not a chronic problem. The real issue is that older teachers have accumulated a backlog of unused sick days and the board does not

want the teachers to use them or to pay them for it.

What are conditions that teachers face?

The Archer administration and the news media made a great deal of the school renovations over the summer. At the high school where I work the walls were painted and the floors waxed, but the broken windows and floor tiles were not fixed. In my room a window that wouldn't stay up was simply screwed shut so it can't be opened on a hot day. In the back of my classroom there is a hole in the floor where a section of the tile and cement is missing. There is an attempt to claim that the teachers are ungrateful for the effort, but in reality it didn't even scratch the surface of what must be done to improve the physical character of the schools.

How did the teachers decide to strike?

Throughout the summer the Detroit Federation of Teachers did not contact us about the contract negotiations. Then a week before school was set to start, the DFT sent us a letter saying there was the possibility of a strike. They called a meeting, but made it sound like it was an informational meeting, rather than one to decide whether to take strike action.

Three thousand teachers showed up, less than 50 percent of the membership. But these teachers overwhelmingly opposed the provisions that the DFT had agreed to, not to mention what had yet to be resolved. They also recognized that the board was determined to impose merit pay, a lengthened workday and other regressive measures.

Elliott's condescending attitude incensed the teachers. He also brought in a lawyer to scare the teachers by saying that if we struck, Engler and the legislature would hit us with punitive actions. The DFT was saying, in essence, you can't strike against the enemies of labor. But when the Democrats are in power they say you can't strike either because you don't want to hurt your so-called friends.

What angered the teachers most, however, was that after all the talk about reforming and improving the schools, the board only agreed to "study" the possibility of reducing class sizes. The fact that they said this, the day before school was about to start, was an affront to the teachers.

There have been all kinds of studies showing that smaller class size influences learning in a positive way. Of course, every class has its own dynamic, but overcrowded classrooms make it far more difficult for children to learn and for teachers to work with them. Every one of my high school classes has more than 30 students, and four out of five of them have more than 35. There are not enough desks to accommodate that many.

The need for smaller classes is even more acute at the elementary school level, where students are being introduced to basic skills, such as reading and math, which prepare them for later years. If they are in overcrowded classrooms their ability to learn will be jeopardized permanently.

The fact that the school authorities were not interested in lowering class sizes clearly indicated to the teachers that school "reform" was not about improving conditions for teachers and students, but involved some other agenda.

What Adamany and the others want is to impose the corporate model, based on free market principles, on the schools. But people go into teaching because it is a fulfilling profession that serves a socially useful, urgent and necessary purpose. The authorities say the schools should be

run like General Motors and that we should forget we are dealing with the complexities of human development and deal with children like cars on an assembly line. Unfortunately, a poorly made car can be recalled. How do you recall a poorly educated student?

Public education has always had a democratic component. The board's proposals were deeply hostile to this conception. This was something that deep-down most teachers felt, but were not able to articulate.

What limitations were revealed in the political understanding of most teachers?

Many teachers don't understand the extent to which Democratic and Republican politicians hate public education. For example, Clinton is proposing tens of millions of dollars for charter schools. The fact is that the democratic and universal character of public education is incompatible with a society that is geared in every respect to the ever-greater accumulation of wealth for a small percentage of society. There is a deep polarization in America between a fabulously rich elite and the rest of the population. Public education is the last great social reform that has not been abolished. But those who control America's wealth and political power want to reestablish an education system based on class and privilege.

It was a very different America when public education was being established. Even though there were sharp class differences there was a concept that everyone had the right to an education regardless of class, ethnicity or race. Public education provided a certain hope to ameliorate the oppressive conditions that affected so many people. That is no longer the prevailing viewpoint of the defenders of capitalism.

Millions have been cut from public education and the school systems have been gutted. Now the powers-that-be want to further downsize education in Detroit behind the guise of school "reform."

The Detroit news dailies carried out vitriolic attacks against the teachers. The Detroit *Free Press*, the more liberal of the two papers, was uniformly negative to teachers, denouncing us for sacrificing the needs of the students to serve our own self interests. Yet despite the media barrage the teachers had the sympathy of parents, other school employees and workers, as well as the students. But this was undeveloped support.

During the strike, American Federation of Teachers President Sandra Feldman came to Detroit for the express purpose of reestablishing Elliott's control of the strike. Up until that point, Elliott could not have spoken in front of the rank and file without vocal opposition. But the AFT and the various opposition caucuses shored up his support and allowed Elliott to negotiate a betrayal.

I raised during the strike that Clinton and the Democrats were supporting charter schools and the assault on education. Many teachers believed the main enemies were Governor John Engler and the Republican legislature. They had great illusions in the role of the Democrats, like Mayor Archer. While many teachers opposed Elliott's actions, they haven't broken with Elliott's support for the Democratic Party. The notion that workers should take a politically independent road has not been grasped even by militant teachers.

The understanding that the defense and expansion of public education is bound up with the struggle for socialism and the abolition of the capitalist market is considered by only the smallest section of teachers.

What was the role of the dissident factions in the DFT?

In the early days of the strike the Membership Action Caucus (MAC) received a hearing from rank-and-file teachers. They were seen as opposing the union leadership and in a limited way speaking to the issues concerning teachers about the school board. But their support waned rather quickly shortly after the strike began because they had no perspective other than calling for a strike. They were incapable of either making an assessment of the political forces that were arrayed against the teachers or honestly explaining what kind of political struggle was necessary to mobilize the working people of Detroit behind the teachers.

After the strike vote, 150 people, mostly striking teachers, attended MAC's meeting. These were teachers who were uncommitted to any faction in the union and were looking for leadership. But most left feeling very distressed. The MAC group was unprepared and unserious. They insisted that the state would not intervene to break the strike. Nor did they speak to the political issues involved in the strike: that teachers were confronting a struggle against both the Democrats and Republicans, who were backing Adamany and the school board. Nor did they warn teachers that the DFT was conspiring with these enemies to end the strike and pave the way for school "reform," i.e., closing of "failing" schools and the firing of "nonperforming" teachers. In fact the DFT's parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, supports "reconstituting" schools.

I spoke on several occasions at the MAC meetings, explaining that this was not just a fight against the school board, but against the whole state. I warned about the possibility of an attack on the teachers, whether through fines or an injunction. If the strike continued, I said, an enormous campaign would have to be launched to win the active support of the working class throughout Detroit. Such a campaign would have to make clear the lineup of forces who were attacking the democratic right to public education and seek to mobilize workers independently of and against both political parties and the corporate interests behind them, as well as their servants in the trade union bureaucracy.

According to Steve Conn, the head of the MAC caucus, all that was needed was "one more push" in the strike. In the end the teachers recognized that the MAC caucus capitulated. Elliott had his base of support among the more conservative teachers. He had his people on the floor to intimidate his opponents.

A small, but significant, layer of teachers seriously considered the issues that were raised by the *World Socialist Web Site* during the strike. They read and discussed the statements written by the *WSWS*, which stressed that at the heart of the strike was the defense of public education, and that this was a political struggle. Teachers, the *WSWS* said, needed a new political strategy to oppose the lineup of forces against education, and that the trade unions, even if led by honest leaders, were inadequate in the face of this attack.

MAC was unwilling to raise these issues. Instead they aligned themselves with black nationalists. These people were angry about the state takeover, not because they were concerned with the needs of students, but because they had prospered from the corrupt relations with the old school board. Yes, the new school board was imposed in a thoroughly undemocratic manner and was hand picked by Mayor Archer and the corporate interests he speaks for. But the MAC group was allying itself with another faction of the Democratic Party, such as cable television millionaire Don Barden and the Black Slate, who were just as reactionary, if not more so. To these people everything is a race question.

At the first MAC meeting teachers asked why a member of MAC, such as Steve Conn, could not lead a new rank-and-file negotiating committee. Conn just sat silently. The MAC group didn't want the leadership of the strike and in the end they were instrumental in giving Elliott new life after he was discredited in the eyes of the teachers.

Nothing they said about the teachers strike ever rose to a critique of the capitalist system. Instead they claimed that if teachers won a few reforms in their contract it would be enough. But the introduction of free market policies and the dismantling of public education by the entire political establishment cannot be fought simply as a trade union struggle. These are big social issues that can only be resolved through a political fight by the working class.

How was the strike ended?

The size of the second mass meeting, and the more prevalent sentiment that the strike had to end, had a chilling effect on many of the most militant teachers who supported the strike. It was palpable. I could feel the change, as compared to the first meeting. Elliott and his supporters had

mobilized many conservative teachers, many of whom had opposed the strike from the beginning and would never have been seen on the picket lines. Older teachers were given a rather large pay increase to end the strike. Moreover, there was also a great desire to go back to the business of teaching students, a feeling that is somewhat inherent in the profession, as it is with other professions such as nursing and medicine.

The real issue, however, was that the vast majority of teachers, including those who supported the strike, knew they didn't have a leadership to carry on the struggle in the face of strike-breaking threats by Engler. If we had not struck, the school board would have run roughshod over us. But nonetheless, the school authorities achieved the major goals. Adamany can impose merit pay; we lost preparation time; the board will now have an easier time of firing teachers and closing so-called failing schools. What was exposed at that meeting was the real limitation of strike action.

What are the present teaching conditions?

Under the present conditions it's almost impossible to make a classroom your own. You have neither the time nor the money. There are even less supplies than last year. There is no paper or pencils. Children are supposed to bring in these supplies, but many cannot afford it. They come from living conditions that are so disruptive to their ability or desire to learn. Some do not even spend each night in the same place.

Many children, through no fault of their own, don't really know why they are in school. In many cases, however, school is the only means of social interaction that they have. And many come just for that reason. As a teacher I spend hundreds of dollars out of my own pocket for supplies. Last year I spent \$200 on pencils, paper and other things.

One of the most crucial parts of teaching is preparing lessons. Teachers can prepare worksheets every day to follow a particular part of the curriculum. But to rely solely or even primarily on worksheets is not good teaching. Teaching requires creativity and attention to how students express their intelligence. There are many levels to intelligence, not just those that are traditionally addressed in the classroom—the verbal and logical/math expressions of intelligence.

I teach science. We live in a climate of opposition to science, with the Religious Right attacking evolution. Moreover there is a general decline in scientific literacy. I try to make science as diverse and interesting as possible, with varying degrees of success or failure.

The difficult circumstances many youth come from serve to suppress their curiosity. You have to try and rekindle that. I teach biology, so I think there should be life in my classroom. Last year the teacher had a lizard, but took it with her when she left. So when you get your paycheck you buy supplies. We have microscopes but they are in various stages of disrepair.

They claim that teachers aren't trying to do their best with what they have. But you have to have the preconditions for students to learn and become interested in science or any other subject. Our school is not the worst. We have a science office, many schools do not. I try to bring in examples of microscopic organisms—hydras, protozoans—and have kids look at them under a microscope. It's very rewarding when they get excited to see life. As a teacher, you sometimes have to manufacture enthusiasm. After all, if you're not enthusiastic about what you're teaching, how can you instill the necessary level of interest in kids? But it's often difficult to maintain enthusiasm when you lack the most basic supplies, or because of overcrowded classrooms you can't give students the individual attention they need and deserve.

See Also:

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