

High school students protest in Detroit

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Thousands of students walked out of classes at Detroit high schools Tuesday, angered by a series of rapes of girls on their way to and from school, and by the lack of any effective response by school and municipal authorities.

The largest protests took place at Denby High School on the city's northeast side and at Murray-Wright, Northern and Martin Luther King near downtown. At least six other schools were affected. Most students left classes at third hour, 11 a.m., and marched to the nearest police station or municipal building, then back to school.

More than 1,000 students from Murray-Wright and Northern marched to the School Center Building, the headquarters of the school district, and traffic was blocked for some time on Woodward Avenue, the city's main thoroughfare. Students from Cass Tech and Martin Luther King marched outside city hall, the Coleman A. Young Municipal Center, chanting, "No safety, no school."

The protests continued into a second day Wednesday, but on a smaller scale, with hundreds of students leaving classes at Denby, Finney and other schools, and a noticeably harsher response from school officials and police. At least 20 students were arrested in scattered clashes with police. The school district announced that principals would be free to suspend participants in Wednesday's walkout, but not those who took part in the larger action the day before.

A total of nine female students have been raped while walking to or from high schools or middle schools in Detroit since the school year began two months ago, at the end of a 10-day teachers' strike. The first assault came on the first day of school, and the most recent was on Monday. After initially downplaying the attacks, the local media has begun to give the attacks heavy publicity, especially after three separate suspects were arrested. All three men were released because of

insufficient evidence.

The walkout appears to have been triggered by an appeal from widely known WJLB radio DJ Jon Mason, who devoted the "Mad as Hell" segment of his Monday radio program to a denunciation of Mayor Dennis Archer and school authorities for ignoring the series of rapes. One student caller proposed the time for a walkout at 11 a.m. the next day, and Mason endorsed it enthusiastically. Many students said they learned of the planned walkout through the radio station, and xeroxed fliers urging the action were distributed inside many schools the next morning.

The radio program also evoked a response from a group of suburban high school students, from Roeper School in Birmingham, who drove to Denby High School Tuesday and stood with placards expressing their support for the Detroit students until they were asked to leave by police. The students told the WSWs that they had come to show that suburban youth sympathized with the conditions faced by young people in the inner city.

Students who spoke to the press during the protest voiced anger and suspicion over the response of school authorities to the attacks. One of the rape victims attends Denby. On Monday, returning to school for the first time, she told school officials that she had seen her attacker inside the school. Instead of responding immediately, they insisted that she seek psychological counseling. At Murray-Wright, students charged the principal with concealing the fact that a 24-year-old man was found in a girls' restroom Friday.

The exact circumstances of these incidents remain unclear, but the allegations express the widespread belief among students that neither school officials, Mayor Archer nor the police themselves are genuinely concerned about the dangers which they face. One Murray-Wright student summed it up, saying, "They don't care about the students. They're not concerned for

our safety."

While the immediate spark for the protests is the series of sexual assaults on school girls, there is growing tension over the deteriorating conditions both inside the schools themselves and in the city's working class neighborhoods, among the poorest and most blighted in America. One factor in the series of rapes is the failure of the local government to bulldoze or renovate the thousands of abandoned homes in the city. In most of the attacks, the victims were accosted as they walked to or from school, then dragged into abandoned homes and assaulted.

Security has long been a major concern of school authorities, since the introduction of metal detectors and uniformed guards more than a decade ago. But the youth themselves have been viewed as the threat, not the potential victims. The result is that school children walk to school vulnerable to attack, and then encounter prison-like conditions once they enter the school buildings.

The students who participated in the walkouts do not see their conflict with the city and school authorities as a political struggle, but voice an instinctive distrust of the political and economic powers in the city. They can see that millions of dollars are being pumped into the renovation of the downtown area—with the construction of new gambling casinos and sports stadiums, as well as theaters, restaurants, hotels and shopping areas for the well-heeled—but not into the decaying school system.

On Tuesday, the day the walkouts began, city officials, businessmen and the media were gathered downtown for the groundbreaking of a new football stadium, to be named Ford Field, after the auto billionaires who own the Detroit Lions. The stadium will cost more than a quarter billion dollars, far more than will be spent on all school buildings in the city.

In the absence of a broader political understanding, however, there is the danger that the students' legitimate concerns can be manipulated for reactionary purposes, such as further measures to build up the police presence in the schools, and intensified attacks on the democratic rights of students and of the city's population as a whole. Already, on Wednesday night, a public meeting was held at one large Detroit church where police officials, ministers, Black Muslim leaders and radio DJ Mason all joined forces to present a

mobilization of police and citizen patrols as the answer to the attacks.

Students and their parents have every right to demand that those who prey on young girls be arrested, prosecuted and quarantined. But it is necessary to understand the social context in which such attacks take place. What is it about American society which produces such tragedies?

Crime, drug abuse and other forms of anti-social behavior are the byproducts of acute social decay, in a society where poverty and economic inequality have reached alarming proportions, social services are increasingly unavailable, and a significant number of people are systematically desensitized and dehumanized by the conditions in which they are condemned to live.

The only effective answer to crime is a political struggle to put an end to these conditions. That requires the development of an independent movement of working people fighting for a program that begins with the needs of the working masses, not the demands of the capitalist market and the profit requirements of the banks and corporations.

Such a movement would answer the ongoing social decay in Detroit, not with casinos and more police—the program of the Democratic Party administration of Mayor Archer—but with the systematic rebuilding of the economic and social infrastructure of the city, to provide decent-paying jobs, and well-funded social services, including public education, for all.



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