

Corporate Detroit demands more school cuts

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On orders from Detroit Schools CEO Kenneth Burnley, 700 school district workers were laid off in January, including 120 maintenance workers, 49 social workers and 165 teachers. In addition, 88 clerical workers and 70 upper-level administrative positions have been eliminated, on top of the 277 administrative positions cut last spring.

The layoffs are part of a multimillion-dollar budget-cutting package worked out between the Democratic-controlled city administration, Michigan's Republican governor and the auto and business executives who sit on the school district's so-called Reform Board. The district's current deficit is \$70 million and it is estimated that the shortfall might double by next year.

The cuts will have a devastating impact on the schools, which have faced years of budget-cutting, layoffs and official neglect, as politicians from both parties drained money from the public schools to pay for tax breaks for big business.

Detroit's children already face enormous obstacles to learning because of poverty, hunger and the lack of health care. Seventy percent of the district's students qualify for subsidized meals because they come from poor families; in some schools the rate is higher than 90 percent. The school system also has one of the highest dropout rates in the country—about 40 percent.

At a January rally in Detroit, parents, teachers and school workers carried signs denouncing the layoff of social workers in the schools. Only 200 social workers are left to serve a student population with multiple social problems spread across 268 elementary, middle and high schools. In addition to the cuts by the local school board, reductions in state funding for school-based health clinics have resulted in the closure of three facilities in the Detroit schools.

Among those being laid off are carpenters, plumbers, roofers, construction laborers and janitors, who are badly needed because of the general disrepair in the

schools. Two days before announcing the new round of layoffs, schools CEO Burnley signed a 10-year \$78.5 million contract with Aramark-ServiceMaster to manage the maintenance of more than 250 school buildings. Several hundred workers lost their jobs last spring when Burnley signed a \$26 million contract with Aramark-Gourmet to take over food service and hired Detroit-based Compuware to privatize the district's information technology functions.

Workers report that in some cases two custodians now work overlapping shifts in a school and are expected to do the work once assigned to four to six people. One custodian with three years seniority, for example, was bumped into a day-labor work arrangement after maintenance slots at a different school were cut. Teachers and students report that many classrooms are no longer being cleaned overnight.

Because low pay and poor working conditions made hiring more qualified teachers difficult, the district has operated for years with about one in every six of its 8,300 classrooms staffed by a non-certified teacher. Many teachers without state certification have been laid off and others shifted into day-labor substitute positions.

Under a new budget-cutting plan, some schools could be shut down altogether. Burnley closed several special education schools last year under the cover of "mainstreaming" children with learning disabilities and other developmental problems. A special education teacher fears enrollment in her special education class could double from 17 to more than 30 if classrooms at other schools are eliminated. Detroit educates 20,000 special education students, roughly one out of every ten such students in the state.

While workers and students are reeling from the impact of the cuts, the Detroit regional Chamber of Commerce praised Burnley for taking "unpopular

decisions” to make the school system more efficient. New Detroit, the pro-business lobby that was a key supporter of the state takeover of the district in 1999, applauded the school superintendent for privatizing support staff.

In April 1999, a cabal of Michigan business leaders, state legislators, Republican Governor John Engler and Democrat Dennis Archer, who was then mayor of Detroit, collaborated to pass “school reform” legislation. In what one newspaper columnist described metaphorically as the “night-of-the-long-knives,” the mayor forced the entire elected school board to resign and a new chief executive officer was given the power to make sweeping changes. The Reform Board was manned by representatives of corporate Detroit, including an executive from auto giant DaimlerChrysler.

After years of factory closings and mass layoffs by the Big Three automakers, the population of the Motor City has fallen below one million and enrollment in the schools has dropped steadily to 161,000 students. The enrollment decline has also been accelerated by changes in state education regulations aimed at privatizing public education. The schools of choice programs and charter schools have siphoned off thousands of students and millions of dollars in state funds from Detroit. The loss of this income totaled \$11.6 million in Detroit this year. In addition the state also reduced Medicaid payments to the district, cutting another \$17.7 million.

In 1994 “Proposal A” passed, which tied educational funding more closely to a state sales tax. It was promoted as a way to relieve homeowners of high property taxes and equalize funding for schools in rich and poor communities. While corporations have benefited from tax breaks, the schools have suffered due to the decline in state revenues as the economy entered a recession. In August, a survey found about 40 percent of schools districts in the state already faced cuts due to Proposal A. The measure also did little to equalize funding. Seven years after its inception, the most affluent school districts still spend nearly twice as much as the poorer districts for each child’s education under Proposal A.

State officials have projected a \$1 billion deficit for next year’s overall budget. Only a \$350 million infusion from Michigan’s “rainy day fund” enabled the

state government to continue paying its commitment of \$6,500 per student for the current school year. Detroit Schools CEO Burnley admitted that even with the state’s promised increase of \$200 per pupil next year the district will still have a \$96-million deficit, meaning the 700 layoffs are just the beginning.

Meanwhile, the governor and state officials are gearing up to use unprecedented anti-strike legislation against teachers whose contracts expire over the next several months. The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) is demanding 14 percent increase over three years.

In 1999, the DFT leadership betrayed a bitter nine-day strike against the pro-business “reform” policies demanded by then Mayor Dennis Archer and Interim Schools CEO David Adamany. Now the unions are aligning themselves with Detroit’s newly-elected Democratic mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick, an unabashed proponent of corporate interests and privatization. Kilpatrick enjoys close relations with Governor Engler and the Republican-controlled state legislature and helped broker the deal that gave Engler’s appointee on the Reform Board veto power over the selection of a new schools CEO. This cleared the way for the appointment of Adamany, who spearheaded the attack on Detroit’s school employees and students.



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