

# Detroit school employees march against layoffs

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More than one thousand teachers, other school employees, parents and students marched in Detroit Wednesday to denounce the recent layoff of 750 workers by the city's so-called school reform board. The layoffs, which affected substitute teachers, social workers, building tradesmen, custodians and clerical staff, are part of a budget-cutting package to reduce a \$70 million deficit. It is the latest in a series of devastating cutbacks in the nation's eleventh largest school district.

Protesters carried signs denouncing the board's privatization plans, union-busting and the further undermining of conditions for Detroit's 176,000 public school students, nearly three-quarters of whom come from poor families. Demonstrators chanted slogans against school "CEO" Kenneth Burnley and the reform board, which was appointed by the city's former mayor, Democrat Dennis Archer, with the backing of Republican Governor John Engler and large corporate interests in the city.

Marching outside of Martin Luther King High School, teachers also demanded improvements in their contract, which expires over the next several months. In 1999 teachers waged a bitter nine-day walkout, and the governor and state officials are gearing up to use unprecedented anti-strike legislation to block any future struggles.

After the rally hundreds of angry protesters filed into the high school to attend a meeting of the board. After just 10 minutes board Chairman Frank Fountain—a DaimlerChrysler vice president and leader of the pro-business lobby New Detroit—shut down the meeting amid shouts from the audience and the singing of "We Shall Overcome." The board then met in private to press ahead with its budget-cutting plans. This was the third time since 1999 the reform board shut down a public meeting to prevent public criticism.

The protest, one of the largest in recent years in Detroit, was barely reported by the media, which is no doubt sensitive to the growing social anger building among workers in the area hard hit by recent layoffs by the Big Three auto makers and the bankrupt retail giant Kmart.

"Burnley gets a quarter of a million each year, plus a 24-hour armed guard, and now he's given a management company \$78 million to bust the unions and hand over more money to private

contractors," said a carpenter with 23 years seniority. "About 30 carpenters lost their jobs, on top of the painters, machine shop workers and roofers and others who were terminated." He said the schools, on average built in the late 1930s, are in a "shabby physical state."

Gwen, a laid-off mailroom worker with more than 22 years in the district, said, "On January 18, when they had me sign my release papers, they patted me on the back and said everything would be alright. Sure. I've got no job, no insurance and nothing to do. I was just kicked out with no buy-out or anything, after two decades at the school board."

"Governor Engler basically told Burnley, 'Go ahead, destroy the unions, get rid of the public schools and put in charter schools'—and that's what he's doing. The US is spending millions to bomb and kill human beings in Afghanistan—women and children—but we need to take care of the homeless, the mentally ill and the children right here."

A teacher with 13 years in the Detroit schools said, "Education should not be held in the parameters of capitalism. I became a teacher to help influence these children, but the school administrators have done everything to frustrate these efforts. There has to be an alternative way to fund public education so that the children do not suffer every time there is an economic downturn."

Scores of students from Martin Luther King High School joined the protest. They complained about filthy bathrooms with broken fixtures, the lack of textbooks and overcrowded classrooms. Terrence, 15, said, "We have no teachers for art, Spanish or drama. They're firing people when they should be hiring more. America is supposed to be the most powerful country in the world. It's fighting wars all over, but we have people starving and can't give kids good schools."

"A lot of students are leaving and, if parents can afford it, they get put in private schools because the public schools are not doing their job. The district is packing the rest of us inside overcrowded schools and looking for any excuse to expel students. They carry out these hall sweeps and if a student is five minutes late because his class is on a different floor, he gets kicked out."

Antoine, a 14-year-old student, said, "My mom is a social worker and she could be laid off. It's not fair—people have to have jobs. They're taking away our right to equal education. Kids who can't pass tests are taken out of the better schools, which get more money, and get stuck in overcrowded schools. But testing doesn't define who we are."

Among those being laid off are 50 social workers, who help children cope with chronic social problems that make learning even more difficult. A recent study, for example, showed that Detroit's children have some of the highest levels of lead poisoning, which contributes to several learning disabilities.

Ted, a psychologist, said, "Laying off social workers and psychologists who service kids who are at risk, that just shows you the school board doesn't care about the children. Many of our students come from poor single-parent homes or have an aunt or grandparent looking after them. Sometimes the oldest child looks after them. In many cases when you call home the phone is disconnected. Kids have had to move many times and have attended multiple schools because they are poor. There is no continuity for them, and this causes many problems."

"The neediest kids come to school and they are not even being taught by certified teachers, but full-time substitutes because the district won't pay decent wages and fill vacancies. Now Burnley is bringing in the corporate world. He's not called the school superintendent any more, but the CEO. He's hired executive directors making at least a \$100,000 each. Private school management companies like Edison are already making inroads."

"What I hear is that the board is going to retain some of the social workers to service the special education children because the district gets federal Medicaid dollars for them. The social workers who help regular children are going to be contracted out from St. John Health System, a private company without a union. In other words the board is putting a price tag on the heads of these kids."

"What's going to happen when the next school shooting or crisis takes place? Are the private companies, who are little more than hired guns, going to know what to do? We are with these kids day in and day out, we know their problems. If the board got rid of a few executive directors with their huge salaries that would be enough to hire a lot of social workers."

"I tend to vote for the Democrats, but when it comes to public education, dollars and cents is all that matters for either party. The schools are a big business. I hate to talk about conspiracies, but what is going to happen to the kids who don't get a decent education? They're going to end up in jails, which are now being run by private prison companies."

Commenting on the teachers' nine-day strike in 1999, Ted

concluded, "The Detroit Federation of Teachers has not done much of anything. It is a weak union in the pocket of the CEO."

The DFT bureaucracy's betrayal of the walkout by the city's 8,000 teachers, in fact, set the stage for the current attack. The strike, which erupted in opposition to the DFT leadership, pit the teachers against former Mayor Archer and the pro-business "reforms" which have now come to fruition. Behind the scenes the DFT and the national union leadership worked to end the strike and settle the dispute on management's terms.

DFT leaders at Wednesday's rally once again urged school employees to place their confidence in Democratic politicians, as well as Burnley himself. They urged the school CEO to collaborate with the union to carry through cost-cutting measures, rather than move ahead with his privatization plans—a move which undermines the union bureaucracy's dues base. "We want to sit down with Dr. Burnley and see what we can work out to maintain integrity and save jobs and keep pay intact," said Keith Johnson, a DFT spokesman.

In the days leading up to the protest, DFT leaders denounced calls by a union opposition group for a sick-out, making it clear the union would do nothing to protect victimized teachers. Union President Janna Garrison, said, "We are denouncing [the job action], period. The unions are not in support of any type of work stoppage for tomorrow." These comments dovetailed with threats by school officials to discipline any teachers involved in the sick-out.

Some of the protest organizers were also aligned with former members of Detroit's school board who are touting themselves as the true representatives of the city's parents, students and school employees. In reality, the old school board was so discredited by its corruption, disregard for public input and budget-cutting measures that the unelected reform board was installed without any significant public protest.

The union officials and former school board members are also trying to promote illusions in the city's new Democratic mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick. An unabashed supporter of big business, Kilpatrick enjoys close ties to the Republican-controlled state government and helped broker a deal that gave Governor Engler's representative on the reform board veto power over the selection of the schools CEO.



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