

# Detroit school workers organize wildcat strike against job cuts

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On June 21 and 22, workers from the Detroit Public Schools organized a series of wildcat pickets against the school board's decision to eliminate the jobs of 3,200 teachers, custodians, engineers, bus drivers, repairmen and other employees. The strike was organized in defiance of both the school board and the unions representing the workers, which in the case of the Teamsters union representing school bus drivers, openly collaborated with management in a failed attempt to get drivers to cross the protesters' picket line.

Anger against budget-cutting, layoffs, school closings and the privatization of services has been building for years. This erupted on June 11 when workers received pink slips indicating whole departments would be eliminated and older workers near retirement would lose their jobs and benefits. On June 17 the board was did not hold its regularly scheduled meeting after more than 700 people showed up to protest the layoffs. School Board President Bill Brooks said the meeting was cancelled because they did not have enough security to protect the board from the angry workers, who he attempted to lock out of the meeting. "It becomes a risk management issue for the district," claimed Brooks.

The protests have been met with a virtual blackout by the media in Detroit, which has reacted generally with fear and confusion. Little or nothing has been reported in the city's two daily newspapers, the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News*, while only short reports have appeared on local television. The outbreak of the wildcat strike has particular significance for the working class because it involves a direct struggle with the Democratic Party, which has long controlled the city administration on behalf of the auto companies and other corporate interests.

Moreover, the wildcat strike has brought to a head the long-standing tension between workers and the pro-company unions they are forced to belong to. As workers on the picket line have noted, union officials have offered

no way forward for workers to fight back against the job cuts and have repeatedly sided with management. During the school board meeting workers denounced union officials for selling them out for years and being "in bed with management."

On Monday morning, Teamsters at the east side bus terminal worked with the police to open the gates and demanded their members cross the picket line and come to work.

Shop stewards told the drivers if they joined the protesters they would lose their jobs. At one point they even tried to get bus drivers to crawl through a hole in the fence. None of the drivers, however, would abide. On the first morning of the picketing no buses on the east side and only three on the west side—out of a total of 300 buses—left the terminal.

On Tuesday morning, nine picketers were arrested after the board ordered the police to force the pickets out of the way to allow the buses to leave the yard. Despite the seven arrests on the east side, the drivers supported the picket and refused to drive their buses out of the yard.

At the other terminal the school board coordinated with the police to provide a cordon as the two most conservative workers in the yard were placed as lead drivers to go through the picket. Once the line was opened all the workers were forced to drive through or lose their jobs. To show their support, however, the drivers took their buses to the schools and parked them, rather than picking up students for summer school. Two other picketers were arrested at the west side depot in an attempt to prevent the buses from leaving the yard.

The WSWS spoke to several workers about the cuts and why they were involved in the protests.

"This is outrageous," stated Richard. "There are people here with 22 to 29 years working for the school board that have been told they are laid off. What are they supposed to do?"

Tarrant, a plasterer with more than 20 years who was told he was laid off, said the board has laid off all but three plasterers for all of the schools. “No one is letting the public know what is really going on. What happened to the money?” Workers expressed dismay that city money is used for casinos and sports stadiums but it is not available for education. “Look,” stated another older worker, “They are spending \$130 billion on the war in Iraq. You mean to tell me that they don’t have money for schools here at home?”

A bus driver’s shop steward walking into the yard where the buses are stored on Detroit’s west side said, “People do what they have to do to stop the layoffs. These layoffs have affected every department. It’s a tough situation because the kids can’t get to school. But what is going to happen in the school year when all of the layoffs will have their largest impact?”

Emmanuel, one of the workers laid off as a part of the job cuts, said he was picketing to fight against the massive job eliminations. “I call it union-busting. They want to get rid of the workers and bring in cheap labor. This is the second series of layoffs. Two years ago they laid off 210 people, now they want to layoff 3,200. Where does it stop?”

Emmanuel said he has worked as a painter for 22 years, but the last 15 were with the school board. He was incensed over the cuts. “They plan to lay off 400 building tradesmen, leaving only 48 to cover 300 buildings,” stated Emmanuel. “When I first started they had 180 painters. Now there are 3. How can 3 people cover 300 buildings?”

A carpenter told the WSWS, “They want to outsource custodial and building trades. They had contractors already in the building as soon as they told us we were laid off. They are not being monitored by anyone, since there is no one left to monitor them. Eighty percent of what they do we have to redo.”

“They have devastated us twice. Two years ago they took 300 people. The whole idea is to privatize everything. This is not just happening in Detroit, it is happening nationwide, in every school system. The private sector has learned that it can make money off the school systems.”

“The media does not tell the truth. They pick and choose what they report.”

Another building trades worker said, “Our union has signed off on this, they have really sold us down the road. There is so much underhanded stuff, people are being paid off under the table.

“We are down here as a coalition of all school

employees. The people are beginning to see that it is the people at the top who are responsible for what is happening.

“[Detroit mayor] Kilpatrick wants to control the board.... How can you give a casino a 30-year contract and you give employees a two-year contract? They go on in their lives and get rich as executives, while we are walking and picketing. This is very serious. It is affecting whole families.”

Robert, a former head custodian at Parkman elementary, said, “We want to let the people know their jobs are next. It is just a matter of time. It looks like they are going to try to do contracting out on all the jobs.

“I have been working for the board eight years. I come to work on time every day and do my job. Now I am out of work. I was told June 13 that I had been laid off. They are not even laying people off by seniority. Everyone is angry.”

Reverend Thomas Jackson, a 22-year school worker who was also laid off, is one of the leaders of the picketers. He and other workers have organized a rank-and-file group called the DPS United Workers Coalition Committee. Reverend Jackson said the board may have moved the buses today but they planned a larger body to show up the next day. “We are telling people to bring their families and their friends. We have to fight. We have no other choice.

“We have people who have both husband and wife working for the board who have lost their jobs with more than 20 years apiece. This is a serious fight.”

Jackson said, “Our demands are to rescind the cuts and for an injunction against the layoffs. The School Board is violating our contract.”



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