

Detroit schools open following a summer of discontent

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Detroit's public schools open this week to a deepening fiscal and material crisis. Throughout the months of June and July more than 1,000 public school and city workers picketed, demonstrated and spoke out in City Council and "town hall" meetings against the massive layoffs of school employees and continuing cuts in city services carried out by Democratic Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and Detroit Public Schools CEO Kenneth Burnley.

As many as 3,200 school jobs have been eliminated since the end of April, when pink slips arrived in teachers' mailboxes. This was followed by the layoffs of support personnel, including janitors, engineers and skilled tradesmen on June 12, and the announcement by Burnley that many of these services would be privatized. The total jobs lost is equivalent to the shutting down of a major auto factory, a common occurrence in Detroit in the 1980s and early 1990s.

More layoffs in the school system and city services could follow next year. The school district is currently reporting a debt of \$80 million, and has projected a \$180 million deficit for the upcoming school year—a figure that could swell further by the setting up of more charter schools that siphon additional students and money from the system.

The state foundation grant of \$6,700 per student, which is based on a formula using sales taxes to fund education, has not been increased in three years. This is causing major disruptions in education throughout the state with layoffs and cutbacks in school districts creating more difficult conditions for teachers and students alike, even as the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act places more pressure on the schools to meet the government's narrowly defined performance standards or face punitive action.

Already overcrowded classrooms will see a further increase in students, especially in the elementary grades where the teacher layoffs have hit the hardest, and in the special education classes where there is already a critical shortage of teachers. The chronic overcrowding makes it nearly impossible for teachers to focus on the individual needs of students.

These cuts come on top of an already dysfunctional system. Detroit residents have suffered through decades of corrupt and incompetent school boards, budget cuts, school closures and deteriorating conditions. In recent years, food service, some maintenance and school bus service jobs have been outsourced, netting millions in profits for the giant Aramark and Service Master corporations. These companies do business by replacing public sector workers with low paid labor, hired from a large pool of unemployed workers in Detroit, and which inevitably includes former school employees who are hired at reduced pay and virtually no health or pension benefits.

Five more schools are slated for closure this fall, and school financial planners have indicated that additional money for textbooks and supplies, already at a premium in many Detroit schools, will be slashed. The overwhelming majority of schools reside in aging buildings that have long been under-maintained. Now badly needed maintenance will be further curtailed. For example, groundskeepers will be unable to keep up with vegetation overgrowth surrounding the schools, inviting an increase in vermin.

The Detroit Public Schools (DPS) serves a large population of poor and low-income students. On average, at least six out of ten students qualify for free or reduced price lunches, indicating that their family income is below the federally established poverty line. However, despite the hemorrhaging of students into charter schools and so-called schools of choice, Detroit remains the largest school district in the state, with 141,000 students.

In the aftermath of the anger and militancy demonstrated by workers over the summer months, school and city workers union leaderships and the political hacks in the Democratic Party are attempting a holding action by diverting attention to the upcoming vote for an elected school board. In 1999, Republican John Engler, then the governor, removed the city's elected school board, in blatant disregard for the democratic rights of Detroit residents. The state then appointed its own board to run the schools and selected Kenneth Burnley as the schools' CEO, following

the resignation of the former superintendent, David Adamany, in 2000.

The prospect of reestablishing the right of city residents to elect their own school board is being held up as a panacea for the problems plaguing the school system, despite the fact that the gutting of public education is a national issue, and not simply confined to Detroit or other major urban centers. In addition, the Democratic Party has supported all of Bush's initiatives, most notably the war against Iraq and the so-called "war on terrorism," whose massive military expenditures, combined with tax breaks for the wealthy, have brought states like Michigan to the brink of bankruptcy.

Throughout the summer, the actions of workers angered by the layoffs have run headlong into the roadblock erected by the rotten alliance between the trade union bureaucracy and the Democrat Party, raising vital political questions for school employees. In meeting after meeting workers demanding action confronted the City Council, only to receive empty palliatives and arrogant admonitions that they were "on their side."

For its part, the Detroit Federation of Teachers, by far the largest school employees union, has been conspicuous in its refusal to be involved in the militant actions, or to render any assistance to laid-off support personnel. DFT President Janna Garrison, in a letter to teachers dated August 6, revealed that the union is working closely with Burnley and the school board to find cost-cutting measures that will negate an earlier threat by the schools' CEO to nullify the final year of the teachers' contract with the district. In particular, the board had been seeking to rescind the 3-4.1 percent pay increase slated to take effect with the start of the school year.

According to Garrison: "The union has provided the District with millions of dollars in cost saving ideas and the District has implemented many of them (and others). In the union's view the \$250 million gap between expected revenues and expenditures has been reduced to less than \$25 million." One of these cost saving measures involves a shortened school day and instructional time for students on Friday in grades K-5, K-6 and K-8, depending on the size of the school. Instead of the normal six classes per day, students will only attend five on Friday, with teachers having a common prep period in place of their normal sixth class.

The DFT is also implementing an early buyout program, as an incentive for more experienced teachers to retire early, thus making room for laid-off teachers and LLIs (substitutes in regular positions). The buyout includes a \$25,000 incentive payment plus an additional accumulated sick leave sum not to exceed \$23,418. In addition, the union has

endorsed a letter sent by the district to laid-off teachers, especially those with the least seniority (and experience), to opt to accept positions as special education teachers, provided that they file a Plan of Work to achieve the required special education endorsement.

In other words, in order to keep their jobs many of these laid-off teachers, who already have degrees in their specialty areas but tend to be the least experienced, could find themselves in some of the most demanding classrooms while having to incur additional tuition costs and a second student teaching stint in order to hold on to their jobs. In any event, the buyout plan, along with the usual spate of retirements from an aging workforce of experienced teachers, will serve to further weaken an already damaged school system.

The role of Garrison and the DFT bureaucracy is to go along with the privatization of other components of the school system, while maintaining the separation between the mass of teachers and the other school employees whose jobs are currently being destroyed. The union's policy of increasing its cooperation with Burnley in dividing school employees occurs under conditions in which the CEO's job may also be in jeopardy, and with the knowledge that the teachers contract expires at the end of the 2004-2005 school year. Thus teachers should be forewarned that this degree of collaboration will carry over into the negotiations for additional concessions next year.

As is the case with all the school unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO, the DFT has thrown its support behind the campaign of Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, and is, therefore, complicit with the policies that Kerry has endorsed and will continue to advance if he is elected. The wildcat pickets and workers' demonstrations this summer are a portent of things to come. The first order of business for Detroit school and city workers is to draw the lessons of this experience and unite the working class through a break with the Democrats.



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