Massive new round of cuts in Detroit Public Schools

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Detroit Public Schools has announced a massive new round of cuts, including the elimination of 4,000 jobs and the closing of 25 to 40 schools. In a press conference on Tuesday, Detroit Public Schools CEO Kenneth Bunley said the cuts were being made to comply with a state law to balance the budget by the end of the fiscal year in June 2005.

The 4,000 job cuts are in addition to the 2,100 jobs eliminated since April of last year. The new school closings will add to the 21 schools that have shut their doors over the past five years. Ninety teaching positions will be immediately terminated, with another 50 to be cut next semester.

The announcement elicited a predictable response from Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) President Janna Garrison who, in an attempt to reassure teachers increasingly angry and disgusted over the state of affairs, claimed that the jobs losses would be absorbed through attrition—buyouts of high seniority employees and retirements.

In reality, the new round of cuts places in jeopardy the continued existence of a public school system in the one-time capital of the world's automotive industry. The school closures will result in both student and teacher dislocations. Students will have to travel on an increasingly decrepit public transportation system to arrive at school on time. Teachers will be shunted about, bumping those with less seniority to different schools. Some schools and classrooms will become more crowded. These hardships, as well as the decision of some families to enroll their children in charter schools, will further impact the dropout rate. And all this may occur in the middle of the school year!

At Tuesday's press conference, Burnley announced the cuts in a dry, matter-of-fact manner, as though this was a business decision (which, in fact, it was), giving no specifics concerning which schools would be closed and which jobs would be eliminated. Feigning ignorance, he stated that none of the experts predicted either the continued drop in enrollment or the payment of $11 million to the state for the teachers' retirement fund, an absurd admission given the fact that a vast number of Detroit's teachers are approaching or have already reached retirement age.

He then cited statistics that indicate enrollment has fallen by more than 20 percent, from 175,988 in the 1996-1997 academic year to 147,000 today. The budget deficit, he claims, includes a whopping $197 million for the year ending June 30, 2005, and a $48.7 million deficit from the 2003-2004 fiscal year.

Other plans to balance the budget include nonunion employees, such as principals, paying 20 percent of their benefit premiums; increasing the cost of co-payments on prescriptions; and the issuance of deficit-reduction bonds. Burnley is also requesting that the $15 million supplemental funding received from the state takeover of the school system in 1999 be maintained. But the state representatives of both parties, as well as the current governor, Democrat Jennifer Granholm, have already opposed any bailout for Detroit's schools, especially since voters in the city overwhelmingly decided in the November election to have the right to elect their own school board. As one lawmaker put it: "They want control again. They're going to have to live with the system that everyone else in the state has." The legislators are afraid that other school districts which face the same crisis as Detroit will also want to issue deficit-reduction bonds.

The announced cuts are the latest in a series of political and budgetary attacks on public education in Detroit that have greatly weakened the school system over that past two decades. Even when money was

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available for capital improvements that resulted in the building of eight new elementary schools and two new middle schools in the mid-1990s, the system was plagued by a combination of incompetence, corruption and an increasingly right-wing agenda aimed at dismantling public education, in favor of for-profit charter schools, faith-based institutions and vouchers.

The appointment of Burnley in 2000 by former Republican governor John Engler, following the departure of then-schools CEO David Adamany, marked an acceleration of a process already well under way. During the intervening four years, enrollment has steadily declined and thousands of teachers and support staff jobs have been eliminated. One could argue that the dismantling of the Detroit Public School system has been "job one" since the first day of Burnley's appointment.

In a press release, Burnley stated, "Many urban public school systems in our country are in a similar situation." His conclusion?—"The district needs to get smaller, faster in order to bring our expenditures in line with revenues and to be able to provide the type of high-quality education that our students deserve. We know what we have to do, and it must be done with precision and urgency. We have the right team with the right experience and right judgment to make the district stronger, leaner and more effective. Smaller will be better." These are words of a corporate executive, not those of someone who has any concern about the current and future education of young people.

It may appear ironic, given the fact that the Bush administration's "No Child Left Behind" Act was ostensibly designed to create conditions to close the "performance gap" between inner-city children and those in more affluent school districts. But a careful examination of the situation confronting Detroit teachers, administrators and students is in reality the product of the same pro-big business model being imposed on public school districts throughout the country faced with deficits.

It should be noted parenthetically that the role of the American Federation of Teachers and its Detroit affiliate the DFT, has been to serve in an advisory capacity, assisting Burnley and the school board in administering the cutbacks and in streamlining the budget.

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