

SEP leaflet distributed at Michigan rally

New political strategy needed to defend public education

Socialist Equality Party
24 June 2005

The following is the text of a leaflet distributed by supporters of the Socialist Equality Party at a rally of teachers, parents and school staff in Lansing, Michigan on June 21. [See “Michigan teachers protests cuts in public school funding: Unions promote Democrats at mass rally” 24 June 2005]

Michigan’s public school system is facing its worst crisis in decades with an endless stream of attacks on the jobs, working conditions and benefits of teachers and other school employees. This has been accompanied by an accelerating trend toward privatization, exemplified by the spread of substandard charter schools, faith-based and for-profit institutions. After years of budget cuts, more than half of Michigan’s school districts are planning to implement layoffs and other program reductions in the coming school year.

What is happening in Michigan is part of a national trend to systematically undermine public education and bring back the days when only the children of the wealthy had access to quality schools.

In the face of these attacks a unified struggle must be waged by teachers, school maintenance workers, school bus drivers and other support staff, as well as students and parents, to defend the universal right to public education. This fight must be based on a new political strategy, however, which begins with an understanding of why these attacks are taking place and who is responsible for this state of affairs.

Teachers will find no answers to these questions from the assorted Democratic Party politicians who are being paraded before them today, including Governor Jennifer Granholm.

What right does this big business politician have to

present herself as a friend of teachers and an advocate of public education? Since taking office in 2003, Granholm has cut \$3.3 billion from state spending for public schools, adult education, universities and colleges, the arts and culture, as well as for Medicaid and other vitally needed programs. Granholm, who is currently negotiating another \$700 million in budget cuts with the Republican-controlled legislature, recently boasted that the number of state employees in Michigan had been reduced to the level it was in 1971.

The Democratic governor has even opposed the minuscule increase in school funding introduced in the state House and Senate earlier this year. Her spokeswoman complained that the funding guarantee contained in the legislation—which would assure no more than an inflationary increase or a 5 percent increase each year—was “problematic.”

There is no fundamental difference between Granholm’s policies and those of the Bush administration. Both the Democrats and Republicans defend the interests of corporate America and the wealthy elite, which have looted the public treasury in order to enrich themselves with tax breaks and other subsidies. Both political parties peddle the same big lie that there is no money to pay for public education and other services that tens of millions of working people rely on.

The issue is not the lack of money but how society’s resources are spent. The cost of war in Iraq and Afghanistan has been over \$350 billion. That is enough to hire an additional 6 million teachers nationwide or 150,000 in Michigan alone. Yet hundreds of billions of dollars have been wasted—and the lives of nearly 2,000 US soldiers and countless Iraqis squandered—to further

the interests of the oil companies and other big corporations.

Then there are the tens of millions of dollars raked in by a typical CEO at a Fortune 500 company. Richard Wagoner, the chairman and CEO of General Motors who just ordered the layoff of 25,000 workers, collected \$12,798,572 in total compensation in 2003, including stock option grants, while retaining another \$12,477,364 in unexercised stock options from previous years. The highest paid corporate executive was Edward S. Lampert, a Wall Street financial manager for ESL Investments, who made \$1.02 billion last year. This fortune was largely due to Lampert's deal-making in the merger of Kmart and Sears, a move that resulted in the destruction of thousands of jobs.

Vast amounts of wealth are being concentrated into the hands of a tiny percentage of the population, whose insatiable appetite for gain knows no bounds. For this new capitalist oligarchy, the maintenance of basic democratic rights and institutions stands in the way of their continuing accumulation of riches.

Free public education was originally conceived as a great equalizer. Such luminaries as Horace Mann and John Dewey viewed compulsory education as a necessary precondition for a humane and equitable society. The present ruling elite in America is guided by no such concerns. As is the case in so many areas that involve the basic needs of the vast majority of people living in America today, public education is being sacrificed on the alter of the capitalist market.

The money for free and high-quality public education exists. It is the priorities of the society that must change. The vast reservoir of finances contained in corporate profits, obscene individual accumulations of wealth and unbridled militarism must be diverted toward the meeting of society's needs. A sharp rise in income taxes on the richest Americans alone could go a long way toward resolving the school funding crisis and allow a drastic reduction in the tax burden on working class families. Yet both the Democrats and Republicans reject as impossible any measures that impinge upon the portfolios and prerogatives of their wealthy paymasters.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on all teachers and school employees to rally around a new political strategy that mobilizes the independent strength of the working class against both big business parties. The

fight to defend public education must be accompanied by an intransigent opposition to the war policies of the Bush government and the Democrats, including the reactionary stipulations of No Child Left Behind that allow military recruiters to prey upon high school students.

Schools employees across the state should organize meetings, rallies and demonstrations to prepare for a general strike to defend public education and defeat the cuts. But this can only occur if workers break with and oppose the policies of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and the Michigan Education Association (NEA), which are aimed at dissipating the anger and determination of education workers and boosting illusions in Granholm and the Democrats in the state legislature.

The necessary first step in the mobilization of education workers across the state requires a political break with the Democratic Party, and the building of a new political party of the working class that will fight for socialist policies.



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