

# Unions provide platform for Democrats at Michigan rally vs. school cuts

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A rally held Tuesday in Lansing, Michigan, to protest sweeping cuts in public education epitomized the efforts of the teachers unions to defuse mass opposition and channel it behind Governor Jennifer Granholm and the Democratic Party.

As many as 13,000 Michigan teachers, support staff and parents marched on the state capital, representing the largest mobilization of its kind in Michigan in recent years. But the event was turned into an official Democratic Party event, with the platform dominated by Democratic politicians and Governor Granholm as the featured speaker.

On this political basis—despite the anger of parents and school workers against closures and cutbacks—no effective fight to defend public education can be waged.

Since she took office in 2003, Granholm has instituted an austerity policy of cuts in public spending on the one hand, and further tax windfalls for big business on the other. Per-student funding has remained at \$6,700, and there have been mid-year cuts averaging \$75 per student. Under her administration, \$3.3 billion has been cut from the state budget, affecting public schools, adult education, institutions of higher learning, and other vital social programs. She is presently negotiating another estimated \$70 million in cuts.

The rally was put together by the K-16 Coalition for Michigan's Future, an umbrella organization involving 23 education groups, but dominated by the Michigan Education Association (MEA), and, to a lesser degree, by the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT). The Democratic Party is amply represented in this coalition, and so complete is the degree of integration of the unions into its political apparatus that it is hard to distinguish one from the other.

Through the collaboration of the MEA, DFT and the

Democratic Party, the rally was turned into an appeal to Governor Granholm and Democrats in the state legislature to pass Senate Bill 246 and House Bill 4582. These are stop-gap measures that would take money from the general fund earmarked for other programs and divert them to education. Even if the bills were to pass, they would only result in an increase of \$175 per student.

Nothing was said from the platform about reopening closed schools—reversing 15 years of budget cuts and corporate windfalls—or seriously addressing the deteriorating state of public education throughout the state, especially in working class cities such as Detroit, Pontiac and Flint.

The organizers of Tuesday's rally were determined to control the political direction of the event and contain the anger of protesters. They issued a notice, published earlier in the *Detroit Free Press*, seeking to prohibit large placards and banners so they could supply the marchers with signs promoting the legislation supported by the teachers unions and the governor.

The anti-democratic methods of the union bureaucracy and other organizers of the event included an attempt to exclude supporters of the Socialist Equality Party, who put forward an independent strategy for teachers—linking the fight to defend public education with opposition to the war in Iraq and growing social inequality, and calling for a break with the Democratic Party and the building of an independent political movement of the working class.

In one instance, a Detroit teacher who was handing out the leaflet issued by the SEP (See "New political strategy needed to defend public education," June 24, 2005) was told to leave the sidewalk in front of the Lansing Center. When the supporter refused and informed the person that this was a public sidewalk,

several workers intervened in his defense. “This *is* a public sidewalk! What the hell is going on here?” one worker declared.

Later, two of the rally’s organizers attempted to have three SEP supporters taken away by the police. This attempt failed as well, when police refused to have them removed.

Jennifer Granholm is a fervent supporter of the Iraq war and a rising star in the Democratic Leadership Council, a group within the Democratic Party that has been the main organizing center for the rightward shift in the party since the late 1980s.

But despite her austerity record, Granholm attempted to don a “left” face in the course of her remarks at the rally, declaring, “You have to ask them [Republicans in the state legislature] to choose between investing in our kids and pouring money into special tax giveaways to special interests.”

She also made a demagogic reference to the oil and gas companies: “The owners of oil and natural gas wells take millions out of our budget at the expense of education. I ask you, what is more important, a special giveaway for oil and gas well owners or education for our kids?... Close loopholes. Support public education. Choose kids over corporations.”

In fact, the biggest potential oil and gas “giveaway” is the war in Iraq, which has already drained over \$200 billion that could be put towards funding social needs.

Not once in her speech did Granholm mention Bush’s No Child Left Behind act—which links school funding to providing access to military recruiters—or the proliferation of charter schools as well as faith-based and for-profit institutions in Michigan, which has the highest number of these schools in the country.

The WSWS interviewed some of the rally’s participants, who described the impact of the cuts in education on their schools. Annie Carter, who has been a volunteer parent for 26 years, and most recently worked in the attendance office at Detroit’s Cody High School, voiced skepticism and displeasure at Granholm’s speech:

“When the school district froze \$80,000 for the ‘At Risk’ program at Cody, people protested to CEO [Kenneth] Burnley, but he said the cuts came from the governor. We’ve also lost money for special education. This year we have 16 retiring teachers and 14 more slated for layoff. Where are we going to get the support

for the kids? These are certified teachers. Granholm stepped up and did nothing.”

Ms. Carter further explained that schools now have to compete with each other for enrolment. If a school is under-enrolled, it loses funds and teachers are laid off. “We used to have to do only one fourth Wednesday count [to finalize enrolment numbers], at the end of September. Now the count is also done in February.”

Rosalba LaRosa, a Spanish teacher in the Lincoln Park school district, said, “There have been lots of cuts in Lincoln Park. We now have two remaining out of three teachers in the language department. One person retired and was not replaced. The result is all of us have to take on more kids. There are now 30 to 35 kids in a classroom.”

Ms. LaRosa said that she is using textbooks that are eight years old. “We have been using the same set of workbooks now for several years, and they are wearing out. Initially, we had 35, now we have 10-15 and they are in pretty bad shape.”

LaRosa has been teaching in Lincoln Park for 18 years. “I never imagined things would get like this when I started,” she said. “What bothers me the most is the discrepancy in funding between the districts. In Lincoln Park, the district receives \$6,700 per student. In Birmingham or Bloomfield Hills, it is \$10,000 to \$12,000 per student. This is not right.”

“In those districts,” she continued, “kids can use computer for language classes. We don’t have any of that. I believe that all kids deserve the same.”



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