

Detroit union betrays teachers, agrees to concessions contract

Joseph Kay
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In a meeting on Wednesday, the leadership of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) presented to its membership the contract that the union has negotiated with the Detroit City School District to cover the 2005-2006 school year. By a large majority, the several thousand teachers and staff voted to return to work on the basis of the contract, pending a final ballot September 6. The agreement averted a potential strike by the teachers.

While the main speaker at the event, DFT president Janna Garrison, presented the contract as a successful stand by the teachers, it consists of a series of give-backs and pay cuts disguised as loans or temporary measures. The contract satisfies the demands of the city for over \$60 million in cuts, in spite of pledges from the union not to agree to any concessions.

Most of the concessions have come in the form of pay cuts for the next year. While the teachers have been promised that some of this pay will be returned in future years, the contract has only a one-year duration, meaning that there is no guarantee that the city will not renege on the deal and demand further concessions in future negotiations. In addition, many teachers face thousands of dollars in lost pay that will never be returned. The contract is a rotten betrayal that the school board and union have packaged to appear as a victory for the teachers.

In presenting the contract to the membership, Garrison immediately sought to place the debate entirely within the parameters set by the Detroit City School CEO William Coleman—that the schools face a deficit and that there was no choice but to implement cost cutting measures that will negatively impact on teachers.

“Clearly the district is in deficit,” she said, citing the widely-reported figure of \$200 million. “By law the

district cannot work in a deficit...We said to the district, ‘We will help you get out of this deficit. We are going to propose cost-saving proposals.’” She claimed that while the district said “we want concessions,” the union said no. “Our salaries will be no less than in the previous year.” This is in fact a lie.

According to the contract, all teachers will see a salary cut for this coming school year, thinly disguised as a “loan” of five days salary to the district from all teachers and staff in the DFT. That is, the teachers will give up the salary with the promise that it will be paid back in future years. Two of the five days are scheduled to be paid back by December 2006, six months after the contract expires. The other days are scheduled to be paid back over the following three years. Given a school year of 43 five-day weeks, the deferral of one week’s pay amounts to a pay cut of 2.3 percent.

Nominally, the contract provides for an across-the-board salary freeze for the year 2005-2006. With rising inflation and high fuel costs, this means a decline in real wages for all the teachers over the previous year.

All members of the union will also have their step increments suspended for one year. A step increment brings with it an automatic pay raise, which in some cases can be as high as \$10,000. The contract stipulates that during the 2006-2007 school year the increment from that year will be applied in addition to any increment suspended during the 2005-2006 school year. However there is no provision for payment of the salary lost because the increment was forestalled by one year. This amounts to an additional pay cut for many teachers.

Other concessions include an increase in some co-payments for brand name drugs; the suspension of attendance incentive payments (such as bonuses for perfect attendance) for one year; and the deferral of five

days of sick pay for one year. According to Garrison, the latter concession by itself will save the district \$9 million during the year, meaning that it will cost teachers the same amount.

During a brief question and answer period, several teachers raised objections to the contract and voiced concerns that the teachers would never see the pay they were giving up for the 2005-2006 school year returned to them. One teacher said, “The district is not supposed to operate in a deficit. It seems that in 2006-2007 we will be in a deficit. The board will be able to cancel the return of wages. All they have to say is that we are operating in a deficit so we can’t repay you.”

In response, Garrison admitted, “When a contract expires, there is no guarantee of anything,” however she encouraged teachers to place their faith in the state government, including Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm, who is presented by the union as a friend of the teachers. This is the same government that through austerity policies has forced the city to carry out a series of cuts over the past several years. “We will expect that the Republican-controlled [state] Senate and House will find a way to save their districts, and we will benefit from them,” she declared.

Replying to a teacher who pointed out that she would be losing \$10,000 from the increment freeze in the next year, and that she would not get this money back, Garrison merely repeated that “the district is in a deficit, and they have asked for cost-savings...You will not be happy with this contract.”

One Detroit teacher opposed the framework that the deficit requires cuts, a principle accepted by the union, the school board and city and state politicians in both the Democratic and Republican parties. After denouncing the concessions included in the contract proposal, he argued that the problem confronting Detroit teachers “is a national question, not simply a local question. Education and social programs are being attacked all across the country,” he said. “The criminal war in Iraq is draining billions of dollars of resources which could go toward education and other necessities.”

He demanded to know what strategy the union was proposing to address these problems. Garrison ignored the question entirely and immediately moved on to the next speaker.

At the end of the meeting, a large majority of teachers

voted to return to work rather than strike. Many were concerned about possible fines and penalties that could be imposed if they decided to walk out. The union handed all teachers a large sheet of “commonly asked questions” before the meeting began, consisting entirely of warnings about the negative consequences of a decision to strike. Strikes of public school employees are against the law in the state of Michigan, and teachers can be fined one day’s pay for each day they miss.

The way that the contract was written also indicates that the school board sensed an explosive situation and wanted to avert a strike. School officials originally proposed an 11.4 percent wage cut, which was later modified to a 2.5 percent cut with sharp increases in health care payments by the teachers. Now the contract contains many cuts, including a 2.5 percent wage cut, but they are disguised as temporary loans or stop-gap measures. Several teachers who spoke to the WSWS following the vote indicated that they were relieved that the contract was not as bad as it could have been.

Civil Rights Action Now, the caucus within the union that advocated a rejection of the contract, offered no strategy to address the underlying political questions facing teachers, including the continued subordination of the union to the Democratic Party, or the social roots of the attack on education in the United States.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed two thousand copies of a statement by the SEP and the WSWS Editorial Board, which calls for connecting the attack on Detroit teachers to broader questions facing the working class nationally and internationally. It urged teachers “to combine industrial action with the fight for the building of a new political party of the working class based on socialist policies.” (See “The political issues facing Detroit teachers”.)



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