

Detroit public school workers face new concessions threat

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The Detroit Public School district is threatening a new round of mass layoffs unless teachers and other school employees accept \$105 million in concessions from wages and benefits to offset a projected budget shortfall for the 2006-2007 school year. Teachers are expected to bear the brunt of the concessions, and are being asked to give up \$89 million in cuts from wages, medical benefits and changes in work rules.

Talks between the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), representing some 6,500 Detroit educators, and the school district are at a virtual standstill with less than two weeks remaining before teachers must report to work. With a mass membership meeting scheduled for Sunday, August 27, in which teachers will vote to either strike or begin the school year, it is unlikely that a tentative agreement will be reached.

A reactionary anti-strike law prohibits work stoppages by teachers and other state employees in Michigan. However, in 1999 Detroit teachers engaged in a nine-day strike against an attempt to impose concessions and work rules changes. No penalties were imposed by the state at that time.

So draconian are the district's current concessions demands, that if teachers were to accept the cuts only from their pay to match the \$89 million claimed by schools CEO William Coleman, the result would be a 15 percent pay reduction. For many teachers this would result in a potentially catastrophic decline in living conditions.

However, a large segment of the concessions could come in the form of increased premiums for medical, dental and optical care. Up until now, Detroit teachers have enjoyed medical care comparable only to that found in the auto industry. But the collaboration between the UAW and General Motors that resulted in a sharp jump in premiums paid by both working and

retired auto workers in 2005 has established a framework for the rolling back of past gains in medical coverage that the Detroit school district is undoubtedly examining very carefully.

While DFT President Janna Garrison claims that the union is negotiating for a multiyear agreement, with no additional concessions, she has already made clear the intention of doing away with traditional Blue Cross/Blue Shield medical care in favor of the cheaper, and certainly less comprehensive, medical services offered by HMOs (health maintenance organizations). While it is likely that the large number of older teachers in the DPS will see their medical programs altered substantially with higher premiums and co-pays, it is the younger, newer and probationary teachers who will be saddled with the substandard medical care that many HMOs are notorious in providing.

In response to the implacable stance of Coleman and the district, the DFT has been reduced to demanding that the current school budget be scrapped in favor of a new one. But any new budget proposal will inevitably include cutbacks in programs that are necessary, not simply frivolous as Garrison claims. Behind the DFT leadership's militant posture, including ritualistic calls of "no contract-no work," there has emerged in recent years a clear pattern in the way the DFT negotiates concessions contracts.

Its consistent modus operandi has been to be more than willing to collaborate and advise the district as to where to make the cuts in programs, in benefits, and in changes in work rules. The primary role of the DFT is to insure that some manner of concessions are imposed upon teachers with a minimum of disruption.

One year ago, DPS teachers accepted a concessions contract that resulted in a 2.3 percent cut in pay, increased payments for non-generic prescription drugs

and the cessation of payment step increases for newer and younger teachers. These concessions followed on the heels of a spate of layoffs, teacher dislocations and the elimination of many academic and extra-curricular programs.

At a mass meeting of teachers, similar to the one scheduled for August 27, DFT President Garrison attempted to sell the concessions contract as a “loan” to the school district, declaring: “Clearly the district is in deficit. By law the district cannot work in a deficit.”

Thus, the DFT offered up its services: “We are going to help you get out of this deficit. We are going to propose cost saving proposals.” Discussion at the mass meeting, which had grown increasingly heated, was cut short and the teachers—amidst union-orchestrated chanting of “Vote!” Vote!”—went back to work.

Teachers grudgingly accepted the concessions, which did not take effect until late in the second half of the 2005-2006 school year. However, when the district gave principals and other administrators a pay increase late last winter, presumably from money given up as pay concessions by teachers, teachers’ anger boiled over in the form of a largely spontaneous one-day sick-out on March 22 that closed 54 of the district’s schools.

While teachers and students have been largely dispersed for the summer, the real business of elaborating and implementing the next concessions contract has been ongoing. Predictably, the Detroit Federation of Teachers bureaucracy has kept its members in the dark until the final weeks before the onset of the new school year. In a recent issue of the *Detroit Teacher* Garrison dismissed the continuing silence of the DFT regarding the actual concession demands of the school district with a flimsy justification: “Historically the DFT does not divulge details about day-to-day developments at the bargaining table. We have learned that it is wiser and more effective to wait until we have a tentative agreement that we can present to the entire membership.”

Garrison has repeatedly acknowledged that Detroit is “shrinking” in population, so the school district must do likewise. As if to preempt any discussion that even hints that a broader political perspective is required—which would place the decline of Detroit within the context of the fundamental changes in the global economy, not to mention the burgeoning social

inequality in the United States—Garrison recently remarked: “We are reflective of what is going on in Detroit ... the district has to shrink itself.”

A recent DFT-sponsored “Meet and Greet” candidates get-together was attended by Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm and a number of other local Democratic politicians. Thus the union is throwing its support behind the very person who will likely impose severe penalties on teachers should they strike in September.

No teacher should be under any illusions that the DFT is either capable or willing to defend past gains, let alone fight for new ones. Its continuing support for the Democratic Party, an organization joined at the hip with the Republicans through its support for Bush administration’s brutal war policies, its ongoing attack on democratic rights, and the destructive impact that the No Child Left Behind Act has had on education, precludes any effective struggle to defend public education and the livelihood of teachers.

If industrial action by Detroit teachers becomes necessary in the ensuing weeks, it must be combined with an exposure of this rotten political set-up. Strike action and militancy alone cannot prevail against the continuing attacks on public education by the ruling oligarchy in this country. A political perspective is required that lays the foundation for a new party of the working class. Such a party would base itself on a socialist perspective that defends the fundamental right of all people to be educated and to achieve their full human potential.



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