

To fight wage cuts and defend public education

Detroit teachers need a new political strategy

Socialist Equality Party
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The following statement will be distributed by supporters of the Socialist Equality Party at a mass meeting of Detroit teachers on Sunday, August 27. The teachers are meeting to vote on strike action against the demand of the school district for drastic cuts in wages and benefits in a new contract. The leaflet is also posted as a PDF file. We urge teachers to download and distribute it at Sunday's meeting.

In the run-up to today's mass meeting, Detroit school district CEO William Coleman published a column in Friday's *Detroit Free Press* threatening teachers with fines and other penalties if they strike against the wage and benefits concessions the district is demanding.

Coleman cited the state law against public employee strikes and said it imposes daily fines of \$5,000 on the union and one day's pay on workers for every day they remain on strike. He further threatened to retaliate for a teachers' strike by furloughing "thousands of other employees."

The tactics of intimidation and strike-breaking are being used to impose a 15 percent reduction in wages and medical, dental and optical benefits, as well as a lengthening of the workday and regressive work rules changes. For teachers struggling to meet mortgage payments and support their families, these cutbacks will have devastating consequences.

Coleman seeks to place the onus for a strike on the teachers, blaming them for the crisis of the school system. This is a fraud! With a salary of \$180,000 (and six educational directors under him pulling in \$150,000 each), he speaks for the financial elite that dominates one of the most impoverished cities in the country.

It is not the teachers, whose starting pay is below \$40,000, who are responsible for the crisis, it is the school district, the politicians in Detroit and Lansing, and the big business interests they serve.

Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, at a press conference Thursday to build support for the reelection campaign of fellow Democrat Governor Jennifer Granholm, joined the gang-up against the teachers, declaring that a strike would be "the beginning of the end for our school system."

The united front of school officials, politicians, corporate interests and the media against the teachers demonstrates that the fight to defend their living standards and the right of youth to a decent public education is a political fight against the entire political and corporate establishment. It is necessary to call a strike, but strike action and trade union militancy in and of themselves are inadequate. A strike can be successful only if it is conducted as part of a new political strategy aimed at mobilizing the entire working class against the two parties of big business and the failed profit system they uphold.

This means:

- * Launching a mass campaign to mobilize behind the teachers the entire working class population in Detroit and Michigan. Calls must go out for mass demonstrations and sympathy actions to back the teachers and oppose any fines or penalties.

- * Breaking from the Democratic and Republican parties, which collaborate to enrich the few at the expense of the vast majority of the people, and fighting for the building of a mass, independent political movement of the working class based on a democratic and socialist program.

There is no shortage of determination among Detroit teachers to oppose the latest assault on their living conditions. The principal obstacle they face is the bankrupt policy of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT). The union bureaucracy opposes the type of industrial and political mobilization that is needed

because it means a struggle against the Democratic Party, with which the union is allied.

The alliance of the DFT with the Democrats is bound up with the union's defense of the profit system, which subordinates all social and human needs to corporate profit-making and the accumulation of personal wealth. This system is producing ever greater social inequality—more obscene levels of wealth for the top 1 percent together with worsening hardship and poverty for the mass of working people.

Starting from the defense of the existing economic system, the DFT accepts the premise that “there is no money” for decent salaries and decent schools, and collaborates in imposing the crisis of the system on the backs of teachers. DFT President Jana Garrison goes so far as to advise the school district on which schools should be closed and what programs eliminated.

This in a city where billions are being allocated to expand the casinos and build luxury condos for the wealthy!

Then there is the vast squandering of resources—hundreds of billions of dollars—to prosecute a colonial-style war in Iraq that is killing hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and killing and maiming tens of thousands of American soldiers—a war based on lies and conducted with the support of the Democratic as well as the Republican party.

The one-year anniversary of the Katrina disaster is a reminder of what the ruling elite and its two parties have wrought at home: a rotting infrastructure and a corrupt political system that is utterly indifferent to the lives of ordinary working people.

The Socialist Equality Party advocates a fundamental restructuring of the economy to place the needs of working people and society as a whole before corporate profit and the accumulation of private wealth. To start with, we support a radical revamping of the tax system, to take the burden off of working people and increase the tax burden on big business and the rich.

Socialism means public ownership of the major levers of economic life—the big banks, manufacturing monopolies, transport, utilities, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals and hospital chains—under the democratic control of the working population, so that the wealth produced by workers' labor can be used to meet social needs. Our goal is genuine democracy and social equality.

The democratic notion that all citizens have a right to be educated and attain their highest potential and the ideal of an informed citizenry as the basis for democracy have been abandoned by the American ruling elite. A socialist policy for education would establish as a priority the rebuilding of schools, the retooling of classrooms, the training and mentoring of quality teachers and the broadening of the educational experience of every young person.

The Socialist Equality Party urges all teachers to consider and discuss these vital issues, read the *World Socialist Web Site*, and become politically active in the fight for the political perspective they advance.

All those who wish to discuss the issues facing Detroit teachers and the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party should contact us at www.socialequality.com



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