

Detroit teachers strike against concessions

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Detroit teachers are set to man picket lines Monday morning following a nearly unanimous vote to strike at a mass meeting held Sunday at the Cobo Arena in downtown Detroit. The strike, by more than 7,000 teachers and support staff, is the first since a nine-day walkout in 1999 that ended in a stalemate. Seven years later, the stakes are much higher.

The thousands of teachers in attendance at Sunday's meeting did not need prodding by the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) leadership to make clear their willingness to take on the school district, which is demanding a cut in wages and benefits totaling 15 percent, plus longer hours of work. When DFT President Janna Garrison asked all those who opposed the district's proposal to stand, virtually everyone did.

The meeting expressed the militancy and determination of the teachers to fight the attempt to place the burden of Detroit's budget crisis on school employees and the public education system. However, it must be stated bluntly that the teachers have embarked on a struggle that pits them against the entire political establishment, the corporate elite, the courts and the media, all of which are uniting to threaten massive fines and other sanctions under a reactionary state law that bars strikes by public employees.

The teachers' fight to defend their living standards and demand decent conditions for their students is a political struggle against Democratic Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm, but the union has no desire to wage such a struggle and offers no political strategy for its conduct.

This was made clear by DFT President Garrison's remarks at Sunday's mass meeting. Garrison detailed the district's drastic concessions demands, which include a 5.5 percent pay cut. Under the district's proposal, teachers would also have to pay significantly higher premiums for health coverage.

Other concessions demands include a lengthening of

the school day for K-8 teachers, a reduction in paid sick days from 10 to 5, and the elimination of bonuses. To add insult to injury, the district's offer to repay two of the five days' worth of salary given up by teachers last year is contingent on teachers accepting the entire concessions package.

But the DFT president said nothing about how the union would respond to fines or other sanctions, brushing aside this danger with the remark, "Here in America, just because something is the law sure doesn't make it right."

Such bluster is designed to obscure the implications of the DFT's political alliance with the Democratic Party, which is an alliance with the very politicians and corporate interests that are behind the attack on the teachers. On the eve of the Sunday mass meeting, Granholm and former Detroit mayor Dennis Archer warned that a teachers' strike would "hurt" Detroit and the region. Earlier in the week, Mayor Kilpatrick said a strike would mean the "beginning of the end of our school system."

In the interests of its alliance with the Democratic Party, the DFT is prepared to keep the teachers isolated and seek a rotten compromise with the school authorities.

The teachers themselves must take the initiative to mobilize the entire working class population of Detroit behind their struggle, calling for mass demonstrations and sympathy strike action to oppose any attempt to penalize teachers or break their strike. This must be combined with a new political strategy—a break with the two parties of big business and the building of an independent political movement based on socialist policies.



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