

New threats against Detroit teachers as strike begins

Walter Gilberti
29 August 2006

As thousands of Detroit teachers manned picket lines in the first day of their strike against the school district's demands for wage cuts and other concessions, state and local Democratic Party politicians denounced the walkout and demanded they return to work prior to the scheduled beginning of classes on September 5. At the same time, school officials said they would apply for a court order to end the strike.

Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, in comments aired on WWJ radio, threatened to activate the state's anti-strike law against the teachers. Granholm alluded to the legal "remedies" at her disposal. Under the terms of the law barring public employee strikes, each teacher could be fined a day's pay for every day on strike, and the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) could be fined \$5,000 per day.

Teachers voted overwhelmingly to strike against the district's demands at a mass meeting Sunday afternoon. Bargaining between the school district and the DFT resumed Monday afternoon.

The *Detroit Free Press* published the comments of school board president Jimmy Womack, who declared of the teachers, "They need to take their concessions like everybody else." Womack added that the teachers were "part of the problem and not the solution, right now."

Meanwhile, the teachers, who were out in force at their respective schools, received heartfelt support from students, area residents and motorists. At Kettering High School on Detroit's impoverished east side, the honking from passing motorists and commercial vehicles continued unabated throughout the morning, and at King High School a number of students picketed with the teachers to show their support.

Local television stations reported opinion polls showing overwhelming public support for the teachers

and opposition to the demands of the school district for cuts in wages and benefits, a lengthening of working hours, and other punitive terms in the district's contract proposal. One poll showed 72 percent backing for the teachers.

A teacher at King High School told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "Detroit public schools are top-heavy with administrators. If you compare our district, for example, with Plymouth/Canton, we have more administrators than they do for the number of students, and we have half the student population they used to have.

"We don't need all these managers. They have 12 - 24 assistant superintendents, and they are making more than \$150,000. And we haven't had a pay increase since 2003. We have to buy supplies, and we need technology, and still our school made AYP (adequate yearly progress) in spite of the limited resources.

"'No Child Left Behind' is Bush's thing. If a school doesn't make AYP, the school can be closed down. We made AYP because teachers care, in spite of all the crap they throw at us.... We should be budgeted into the district's expenditures, not budgeted out of their expenditures. It seems like we're the last people they think about."

At Kettering High School, teachers were vocal in their anger and indignation at the school district's intransigence. Special education teacher John Nakic told the WSWS that the main issues were salary, health care and liability insurance, and described the current situation as a "war between the haves and the have-nots."

He said, "Last year teachers were asked for concessions—a week's pay, roughly \$1,500, and several sick days. Meanwhile, the administrators received pay raises."

Nakic added he believed the current crisis was due to fiscal mismanagement. He emphasized the pay inequities between Detroit and suburban school districts, and was particularly critical of the Bush administration's "No Child Left Behind" law and the wording of its requirement for "highly qualified teachers."

He said, "Teachers with families and financial commitments are being forced to go back to school and are ending up with large student loans to pay back."

Another special education teacher with 26 years at Kettering explained: "This is a game now. Every time a contract comes around they force us to pound the pavement. In 26 years I have had 9 strikes. One lasted from the beginning of the school year to October. It's horrible."

"Coleman [the school district CEO] said he would get adult volunteers to man the classes. This is an insult. It's as if to say we don't do anything."

"It's all a political ploy to get more concessions. They are making it clear that the school board does not back the teachers and will not give them any support. As it is, we already provide our own supplies."

"I go out and buy school supplies for my class once a month as part of my regular shopping. Each month I buy soap, sanitizer and all kinds of supplies because the school does not supply many of the basic necessities. Many of us buy prom tickets to help the kids. I even purchased a prom dress for one of the kids."

Mark Johnson teaches math at Kettering. He said, "There is a lot of support because everybody is catching it. It's a sad case."

"I took a vacation this summer and I went to New Orleans. What I witnessed was horrible—there was total devastation. At the end of the vacation I went to Beverly Hills in California. There was not a care in the world there. They didn't feel what the people felt in New Orleans."

"It's just an example of what is taking place in this country. The little man is taking a hit and he is getting tired of it. They want to pay sub-standard wages in a 21st century world. That's why I voted to shut the district down."

"One thing you are right about. The labor movement has to stick together. I saw this with the airline industry. They were trying to get the pilots to work if the other workers went on strike. I will not cross a

picket line. As a math instructor I know how they work. They have two sets of books. When it comes to their bonuses they always have the numbers. But when it comes to the workers there is never any money."

A cosmetology teacher with 11 years at Kettering commented: "They keep saying they don't have the money, but they are spending money all over the place for the casinos and stadiums in this city."

Another Kettering teacher said: "This is an attempt to destroy public education and privatize it, similar to what they did to the prison system."

Richard Perlman, who teaches personal health management and coaches swimming, has taught at Kettering for 25 years. He said, "I have been doing this a long time. This is my seventh strike. I see it as part of a process. Strikes never provide a comfortable feeling. However, the school board didn't give us much of a choice."

"One thing that struck me about this strike is I have never seen so much support from the public. People who pass by are constantly honking their horns or waving in support. I think it is a reflection of how people feel about the economy. Everyone is being squeezed. Probably it is felt stronger here than in any other part of the country."

"This strike is different from the others in that the board is asking for so many concessions. Last year we loaned them money in the form of giving up sick days and five days of pay. I guess it was not enough for them."

"There was no doubt at the meeting yesterday that the teachers wanted to fight against the attacks on our jobs and benefits. And here, only one teacher went into the building. Just as a comparison, in 1999, only 100 teachers went to work during the nine-day strike."

When asked to comment on the statement by Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick that the strike would mark the end of the city's school system, Perlman remarked, "They could be out to break the union. That could be their goal."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact