

Reject the concessions sellout! Mobilize Detroit workers behind the teachers!

Socialist Equality Party
13 September 2006

The following statement is available to download in PDF format to distribute to the meeting of Detroit teachers scheduled for Wednesday morning in Detroit.

Striking Detroit teachers should vote “no” on the sellout contract reached Tuesday between School Superintendent William Coleman and the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT). The few details of the agreement that have been reported make clear that the contract represents a betrayal of the teachers’ demands and a cave-in to the drive by the school board, the city, the state and the corporate elite whom they serve to slash teachers’ living standards and continue their assault on public education in Detroit.

According to local TV news reports, the three-year contract calls for a wage freeze in year one, a 1 percent increase in the second year, and a 2.5 percent increase in year three. These are derisory increases, coming on the heels of years of wage freezes and givebacks. They mean a further cut in teachers’ wages, after inflation, of 10 percent or more over the course of the contract.

This is only the beginning. The contract also includes a 10 percent co-pay on health benefits for all teachers—a provision that will further shrink the income of educators who already have to struggle to make ends meet.

There are undoubtedly other concessionary provisions that add up to cost savings extracted on the backs of the teachers close to the original \$90 million demanded by Coleman and the school board.

Make no mistake: acceptance of this sellout will open the way for even further attacks on both teachers and students. This is not what teachers have been fighting for. They have remained solid and determined in the face of a vicious media assault, a strike-breaking court injunction, and two-faced Democratic politicians such as Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and Governor Jennifer Granholm who pose as “friends of labor” while working with the corrupt elite represented by the \$225,000-a-year administrator Coleman to break the strike and impose the crisis of their

own creation on the backs of the teachers and the rest of the working class.

It has been clear from day one of the strike that the overwhelming majority of Detroiters support the teachers. Now that support must be transformed into a powerful mobilization to defend the teachers against the inevitable attacks that will be launched against them should they reject the contract and remain on strike.

What arguments can teachers expect to hear from Garrison in favor of a return to work? First, the threat—which is real—of fines and even arrests under the state law banning public employee strikes. This, however, is an argument for doing what she and the rest of the union leadership in Detroit have refused to do: turning out to the rest of the working class and fighting for mass pickets, mass demonstrations and sympathy strike action against any attempt to penalize the teachers for fighting for their rights.

Second, that “there is no money” and the contract she has signed onto is the best that can be achieved. Both contentions are lies.

The financial state of the school district and the city is not the responsibility of teachers. How the powers-that-be come up with the funds needed to fulfill their responsibility to provide decent salaries and decent schools is not the concern of the teachers.

The money, in any event, is there. The problem is that financial resources are being diverted into the bank accounts of the elite who were represented on the podium of Tuesday’s press conference: overpaid officials like Coleman, “civil rights” careerists like Detroit NAACP head Wendell Anthony, and big business politicians like Kilpatrick and Granholm.

Any objective examination of the financial records of the city and the school district would reveal millions of dollars squandered in exorbitant salaries and expense accounts, payoffs and sweetheart contracts for business

cronies, and similar corrupt practices. Then there is the looting of resources to pay for corporate tax breaks and the diversion of funds for charter schools.

Billions of dollars are generated to bankroll the casino interests and subsidize the building of sports stadiums and high-rent condos, but no money can be found to provide modern and clean school buildings, books, lab equipment and computers, and to hire enough teachers at decent wages to reduce class sizes.

The real issue is the priorities of a political and social system that subordinates the social needs of the vast majority—the working class—to the further enrichment of a financial oligarchy.

The burning issue posed directly by the strike is the need for working people to break free of the two parties of big business and build their own, independent political movement to oppose the entire avaricious elite that is destroying their living standards and attacking their democratic rights. It must be a movement that rejects the existing economic setup and its backward priorities and advances a socialist alternative—based on human need instead of corporate profit and committed to the principle of genuine democracy and social equality.

The major obstacle in the way of conducting such a struggle is the trade union bureaucracy. The Detroit unions—the DFT, the AFL-CIO, the United Auto Workers, the Teamsters, the AFSCME city unions—have deliberately isolated the teachers and left them to face the threat of government sanctions on their own. This is no wonder, since they are allied to the very party, the Democratic Party, which has for decades bled the city’s working class population and is overseeing the current attack on the teachers, and are even now campaigning for Granholm’s reelection.

If Garrison is not prepared to fight the assault on the teachers, then she should pack up her briefcase and make way for those who are. Teachers should elect a rank-and-file committee to take charge of the negotiations and launch a campaign to mobilize the working class of Detroit behind the strike.

Political demands should be raised, including:

1. Fire Superintendent Coleman and the overpaid “education directors” under him. Establish a committee of educators, school employees and residents to scrupulously examine the district’s finances, instead of the “fact-finding” whitewash proposed by Governor Granholm. This committee should exercise democratic control of the schools and allocate resources to meet the needs of students, not politically connected businessmen.

2. Recall all the advocates of privatization and charter schools from the school board. Halt all funding of charter and for-profit schools.

3. Equip every school with the textbooks, supplies and technology needed for effective education. Tear down dilapidated buildings and construct new school facilities. Hire more teachers to guarantee smaller class sizes.

4. Expand the curriculum to include a wide range of options for students, including foreign languages, social science and the arts. Demand that “No Child Left Behind” be scrapped in favor of the rational utilization of the latest developments in learning theory and teaching methodology to raise the cultural level of Detroit’s youth.

These measures require a vast expansion of resources. Tax windfalls for big business must be ended and the tax structure revamped to lessen the burden on workers and middle-class people and increase the share paid by the rich. Make the rebuilding of Detroit’s public school system a top priority by redirecting tax revenues toward education.

The auto industry, which to no small extent determines the fate of Detroit, can no longer be the personal property of a handful of corporate CEOs and billionaire investors. It must be transformed into a democratically controlled public enterprise so that the wealth created by working people can be used to meet society’s needs, including its most important obligation: providing a high quality education to its youth.

This is the policy advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.

SEP Public Meeting

Political Issues in the Detroit Teachers Strike

Thursday, September 14, 7 p.m.

Northwest Activities Center, Ballroom

18100 Meyers, Detroit



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