

SEP Labor Day statement

Victory to the Detroit teachers!

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party 4 September 2006

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Defeat concessions and attacks on public education
Build a new political movement in the working class

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The entire Detroit-area working class must be mobilized in defense of striking Detroit teachers and school employees. The outpouring of support that teachers have experienced since the strike began last Monday must now be given a political voice and directed against those responsible for the systematic destruction of public education in the city.

The present attempt by the school district to drive down the living standards of teachers and support staff is not simply a labor-management dispute, and cannot be resolved by militant trade union forms of struggle alone. It is a political struggle that pits teachers against the enemies of public education in both the Democratic and Republican parties. The present teachers strike is but the latest battle in an ongoing war over the fate of public education, a vital social institution, and the democratic right of working people and their children to be educated to the level required by an advanced society.

Beginning with the right-wing diatribe "A Nation at Risk," published in 1984, teachers have been the subject of vicious attacks by the big business opponents of public education. This assault has continued under the guise of the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind legislation, which received the overwhelming support of the Democrats in Congress.

This relentless attack finds one of its sharpest expressions in Detroit, where there has been a continuous campaign to blame teachers for the crisis in the public schools. This combines threats of legal sanctions by the Democratic Party establishment in the city and lies by the local media, which smears striking teachers as greedy and uncaring. Incendiary statements by Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick that a teachers strike would be the "beginning of the end of public education in Detroit," were followed by threats from Governor Jennifer Granholm to activate Michigan's reactionary anti-strike law against teachers.

But who is really responsible for the decades-long decline and decomposition of the public schools in Detroit—the teachers? Hardly! Teachers have neither a say in how the district procures funds, nor in their subsequent allocation. They have no control over whether up-to-date textbooks and other essential supplies are bought or properly distributed.

Every day teachers go to work and experience working conditions that can only be described as brutal. Teachers in Detroit are expected to engage students without the proper tools and supplies to do their job effectively. They have, of necessity, become adept at doing a lot with very little, and many spend hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars during a

typical school year for the barest essentials: paper, pens, notebooks, and other mundane supplies, in addition to those more costly items without which a meaningful education is impossible.

Teachers working in schools located in the poorest neighborhoods routinely assist students financially, whether it means making sure a child has a winter coat, or cash for a field trip, a prom dress, or simply to eat lunch that day.

So much for the lies about the supposed greed and uncaring attitude of teachers, peddled by the press and by the venal and corrupt hacks who make up Detroit's political establishment!

While the district has its "pet" schools that are well financed and enjoy state-of-the-art technology, the average public school is a physically crumbling edifice where virtually everything is in short supply. The average age of a public school building in Detroit is 65 years, meaning that many of the larger high schools and middle schools are much older. Many of these schools, particularly in the poorer neighborhoods, are three-story monstrosities that hark back to the distant past. The classrooms have been in a state of progressive disrepair for years, if not decades in some cases. The furnishings for teachers and students alike are old, uncomfortable and often broken.

In science classrooms, the whole setup is obsolete and, for the most part, decrepit. Sinks are unusable due to bad plumbing, and gas and electric fixtures that were used 40 years ago for laboratory experiments are broken, but have not been removed, posing a danger to students. Cupboard and closet doors, some with glass panes, are often broken, and have been in this state for years. Most classrooms lack computer technology, or even the infrastructure to effectively install them.

Many schools are filthy and vermin-plagued. While custodial and engineering staffs work hard to maintain some semblance of usability and cleanliness, due to recent mass layoffs they fight a losing battle.

As bad as the working conditions are inside many of these schools, just getting into the building can be a challenge. School employees, especially females, are routinely robbed in poorly lit and unsecured parking lots. Teachers' cars are broken into or stolen with regularity. On the weekends, many schools, located in neighborhoods where the general living conditions are intolerable, are subject to break-ins by thieves who often remove the few computers, visual aid equipment, refrigerators and other items that can obtain a quick turnaround for cash. Often, these items were originally supplied by the teachers themselves.

The crumbling infrastructure and unsafe conditions, exacerbated by the general economic collapse of the city over the past two decades, has led to a staggering decline in the number of students and teachers in Detroit's public schools. In the past decade, the student population in the city's public schools has plummeted from nearly 174,000 in the 1995-96 school year to 129,000 today. During this same period 3,000 teachers' jobs were eliminated, as meaningful and enriching extra-curricular programs have

been scrapped. Scores of schools have been closed, and many more are slated for closure. In 2005, Mayor Kilpatrick's budget included the closing of 34 schools. Both the school district and the Detroit Federation of Teachers project a continuing per year loss of upwards of 9,000 students per year.

Meanwhile, there seems to be no shortage of funds for the building of charter schools that have sprung up like mushrooms, feeding off the decay of the public school system. There are now over 50,000 students attending charter schools within the city. A few of these schools make a pretense at being "alternative," but most of them are run by various and sundry preachers, entrepreneurs and charlatans, and are staffed by largely inexperienced teachers and administrators who receive substandard pay and benefits.

Presiding over this catastrophe in the Detroit Public Schools over the last two decades has been a series of superintendents who have been either advocates of privatization and the spread of charter schools, or simply corrupt and incompetent. Starting with Deborah McGriff, who left the Detroit schools to become a top executive at the for-profit Edison Charter Schools, succeeded by David Snead, whose tenure was marked by corruption and incompetence, then by David Adamany, an advocate of imposing the "business model" on education and a front man for the ultra-conservative Mackinac Center for Public Policy, and finally by Kenneth Burnley and the present district CEO William Coleman, these figures have systematically dismantled public education in favor of privatization and their own enrichment.

They are part of a rotten, corrupt and largely Democratic Party establishment in Detroit that exhibits all the retrograde features of the capitalist oligarchy that runs this country—contempt for the vast majority of working people, disinterest in democratic rights, callous disregard for the general welfare, and a preoccupation with the accumulation of ever-larger quantities of wealth.

The top executives of the Detroit school district have gorged themselves financially off of the decaying school system. The current CEO, William Coleman, takes in a yearly salary of \$225,000, including 25 days paid vacation annually. Immediately under Coleman is an ever-growing number of so-called "education directors" who garner \$150,000 a year, and whose actual role in the district is, to say the least, obscure. Coleman's immediate predecessor, Kenneth Burnley, was the highest paid school superintendent in the country, although Detroit is the poorest large city!

These individuals are simply a part of the political establishment in Detroit that spends billions of dollars on the refurbishing of casinos and sports stadiums for the wealthy, while city workers are forced to give up health benefits, and ordinary residents asked to pay out-of-pocket fees for basic services like garbage collection.

It should be noted that while the Detroit City Council opposes the fight of teachers for an equitable pay increase, council members recently tried to obtain for themselves a budgetary increase of 23 percent that would give them a \$1.7 million slush fund for their salaries, those of their aides, often family members, as well as office, legal and other expenses.

Mayor Kilpatrick's salary in 2005 was \$176,000 per year, making him the third most highly paid mayor in the country. He has since taken a slight pay cut in a phony attempt to give the impression of "equality of sacrifice" as he attacks the wages and benefits of city workers.

Taken as a whole, the personnel of the Kilpatrick administration, the Detroit City Council, the Detroit school board and its district executives constitute a ruling clique which is the epitome of corruption, cronyism and nepotism. They and their predecessors are part of a political establishment in this country, Republican and Democrat, which has squandered hundreds of billion of dollars on the continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while enriching themselves off the increasingly desperate plight of ordinary citizens. It is the ruling elite of Detroit, not the teachers,

who are responsible for the current disgraceful state of affairs in the public school system.

The teachers strike is truly at the crossroads. The leadership of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, urging their members to assemble at the annual Labor Day parade, is sending a message that their conception of "support" for the strike involves appealing to well-off and pro-capitalist UAW and AFL-CIO bureaucrats and the Democratic Party officials whose campaigns they support and help finance.

Normally Governor Granholm and Mayor Kilpatrick, the very politicians who will impose legal sanctions against striking teachers to force them back to work, would make an appearance during the festivities. The fact that a gathering of these so-called "labor leaders" that head the major unions would even welcome them is testament to the fact that teachers and the working class as a whole cannot take a step forward based on the outlook advanced by these outmoded organizations.

The perspective of the Detroit Federation of Teachers is no different. DFT President Janna Garrison is unwilling to seek the full and independent mobilization of the working class necessary to defeat the concessions drive of the school district, because she is in an alliance with this very same Democratic Party, and agrees that the "defense" of public education must remain within the straitjacket of the capitalist profit system.

The Socialist Equality Party urges striking teachers and the working people of Detroit to reject this rotten political setup and consider the following course of action:

- * Teachers must wrest control of the strike from the DFT bureaucracy. Organize neighborhood meetings, rallies and mass pickets in defense of public education. Establish joint pickets with Eastern Michigan professors and Northwest Airlines flight attendants.

- * Demand the firing of DPS CEO William Coleman and his team of overpaid education directors.

- * Demand the recall of Jimmy Womack and the other advocates of privatization who sit on the school board. Set up a citizens committee to defend public education.

There is a burning necessity for the construction of a new political movement of the working class that would break up the political monopoly exercised by the two capitalist parties. Such a movement must set as its central task the building of a political party of the working class that will advance a socialist program and perspective for the restructuring of the economy.

Socialism means that decisions about how the wealth of society is utilized would be arrived at rationally and democratically by the working people, from whose labor that wealth is created. A socialist policy for education, that most democratic of human endeavors, would involve the refocusing of the resources of society on the improvement of education for everyone.

The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers to consider and discuss the vital issues raised by this strike and to seek a political alternative. The SEP candidate for Congress in Michigan's 12th congressional district, Jerome White, is the only candidate in the November elections who stands in unconditional support of the teachers' struggle and their right to strike in defense of public education and their own living standards.



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