

Detroit schools close as teachers strike enters second week

Walter Gilberti
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The Detroit school district has decided to close all 225 schools in its system “until further notice,” following a failed attempt to reopen the schools in the face of the continuing strike by some 9,500 teachers and support staff. The teachers are fighting to defeat a vicious concessions drive by the district, which is demanding \$90 million in wages and benefit givebacks.

Last week, Detroit schools CEO William Coleman had declared that the schools would open on time “with or without” the teachers, and that there would be a full day of school on Tuesday, the first day students were supposed to report. Over the Labor Day weekend, Coleman was forced to backtrack from this position as it became increasingly clear that without the teachers a normal first day of school was impossible. Instead, Coleman decided to keep the schools open for a half day, with only ninth graders reporting at the high schools.

But even this plan fell apart as only 20 percent of the district’s 129,000 students actually reported for school, where they were packed in cafeterias and auditoriums until day’s end. At some schools located in predominately working class neighborhoods parents arrived at a school only to turn around and drive home rather than cross a picket line. The scores of teachers picketing at virtually every school continue to enjoy overwhelming support from workers, parents and students in the surrounding neighborhoods.

“Obviously it’s not the way school was designed to be,” Coleman later admitted, voicing the concern that “parents will lose confidence in the district because the schools aren’t properly staffed.”

Meanwhile, Circuit Judge Susan Borman once again delayed issuing a back-to-work order against the teachers, despite vitriolic denunciations by Coleman and attorneys negotiating for the district, who have

denounced the teachers for waging an “illegal” strike. Borman has ordered negotiators for both the district and the Detroit Federation of Teachers back to the bargaining table, and has scheduled the next meeting to assess the situation for Thursday at 10:00 a.m.

The determination of teachers to stay out and win their strike is so widespread the DFT leadership has been forced to announce the union would not abide by a back-to-work injunction. For the time being Judge Borman has held back on her threat to break the strike by imposing massive fines on the teachers—a measure that would further discredit the Democratic Party establishment that runs the school district and the city administration—and is giving DFT President Janna Garrison and her negotiating team room to engineer a concessions sellout that they can somehow get striking teachers to accept.

The 36-hour hiatus between meetings is in anticipation that such an agreement can be reached. In fact, there was a point during the day, Tuesday, that there might have been a tentative agreement. Keith Johnson, DFT director of operations, commented that he thought the negotiators were close to a settlement, “but it fell apart.”

There is enormous potential to mobilize the popular support for the teachers—among students, parents and working people throughout Detroit and the suburbs—to wage a fight against the attack on public education and the further erosion of workers’ living standards. The strike, however, is in danger because it is being kept within the narrow confines of trade union negotiations and subordinated to appeals to the Democratic Party—the very same corporate-controlled party that has overseen the decades-long assault on the working class in Detroit, the nation’s most impoverished big city.

In fact, the union bureaucracy makes up a significant

portion of the Democratic Party apparatus in the city and state—whose leading figures, such as Governor Jennifer Granholm and Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, have denounced the teachers’ strike and indicated they are prepared to ask for an injunction if the leadership of the DFT does not end the strike and impose a settlement on management’s terms.

On the picket lines there is a sense that this is a fight to defend both teachers’ livelihoods and public education. Shantell Johnson, a sophomore at Henry Ford High School in Detroit, told the WSWS that she supported the teachers’ strike and was opposed to the deplorable conditions in the school. “I think the strike is going pretty good. I support the teachers. The way I see it, they (DPS) are just taking money out of their paychecks. So what are they supposed to do? I think the teachers are fighting for the same things the students need.”

Shantell then listed the problems students face in the school. “The conditions in our school are terrible. The textbooks are torn and there aren’t enough of them, so people have to share the few that we have. The bathrooms are a mess; the stalls don’t work, there’s graffiti everywhere and there’s bathroom tissue on the ceiling.

“That’s why I support the teachers. We need these things to be fixed.”

Robert Thomas, a special education instructor at Henry Ford High School, commented: “What’s taking place in this city is a shame. They are not giving the kids or the teachers what they need. And I strongly believe we need decent pay. After all, we didn’t go to school to make peanuts. It’s a shame they way this administration is treating us.”

As teachers walked the picket line, a truck driver pulled up alongside them. The driver then proceeded to get out of his rig and explain he was from the Teamsters union and was not crossing the picket line. “I am with you guys,” the young driver stated.

At Stewart Elementary School, a kindergarten through fifth grade school located in an impoverished, working class area on Detroit’s west side, the WSWS also received a warm welcome from teachers manning the picket line. Teachers said there was overwhelming support for the strike and that only 50 students were in the school the first day of classes.

“The students who are in the school were dropped off

by parents primarily because they did not know what to do with their children, not because they were opposed to the strike,” stated Janet. “There is just enormous support,” she continued. “People come by and honk their horns all the time.”

Another teacher at Stewart explained that the school won the status of an exemplary school and was granted a \$60,000 Skillman grant. “That makes us eligible to apply for an additional \$40,000 this year,” she stated. “We have excellent teachers who work hard with the students.... With the present proposals by the board we would be taking a cut of 10-15 percent of wages and benefits.”

“We know that these are hard times,” she continued. “What we want to know is what are they doing to save money? The district has a lot of people on staff making a lot of money.”



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