

Defend the teachers! Mobilize Detroit workers against strike-breaking! Billions for public education!

Of Jerome White, SEP candidate for US Congress from Michigan's 12th District
12 September 2006

This article is available as a PDF leaflet to download and distribute

As the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for US Congress in the 12th Congressional District, I fully support the stand taken by the Detroit teachers and call on all working people to defend them against the strike-breaking injunction issued by Wayne County Circuit Court Judge Susan Borman.

The breakdown of negotiations and the indefinite suspension of classes make it clear that the Board of Education—and behind it the whole political and corporate establishment in Detroit—is determined to impose its demands for sweeping wage and benefit concessions. The school board is now calling on the judge to enforce the terms of a reactionary state law banning strikes by public employees. This could mean teachers being fined one day's pay for each day the strike continues, and Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) officials and even individual union members being jailed.

Workers throughout the Detroit area cannot allow the leadership of the AFL-CIO, United Auto Workers, Teamsters and AFSCME city unions, through their cowardice and complicity, to isolate this strike and allow it to be defeated. The teachers are fighting not only for themselves, but to defend public education, and they must have the active backing of the entire working class. Any strikebreaking action by the courts must be answered by the mobilization of workers and young people throughout the Metro Detroit area in sympathy strikes and mass demonstrations.

What is the line-up in this struggle? On the one side stand the teachers and the vast majority of parents, school employees and students who support them. On the other, stand the corrupt school officials, the Democratic Party politicians, the media and the corporate elite. My Democratic Party opponent, the supposed "friend of labor" Congressman Sander Levin, is part of the anti-teacher front.

He remains silent while the judge threatens to fine and jail strikers.

I flatly reject the claim of the school officials and politicians that "there is no money" for decent salaries and schools. This propaganda ploy deserves only contempt.

While students go without textbooks and even toilet paper, and teachers are forced to spend their own money to supply their classrooms, corrupt school officials have drained the district's resources to enrich themselves and their cronies.

Detroit Public Schools Superintendent William Coleman, whose salary and perks come to \$250,000 a year, epitomizes the corrupt and grasping elite in Detroit. The *Michigan Chronicle* recently detailed how Coleman in his present position steered millions in technology contracts to dubious "minority-owned" companies in Detroit, and hundreds of millions more to politically connected businessmen while he was chief financial officer of the Dallas and San Francisco public schools.

The annual salaries of the top 100 corporate CEOs in Detroit would cover the salaries of all 7,000 striking teachers. Billions are allocated for casino gambling interests, downtown sports stadiums and high-rent condos along the river, while the schools are starved of funds and the city is blighted by poverty and unemployment.

The problem is not a lack of money, but the perverted and socially destructive priorities of an entrenched two-party system that speaks for a financial oligarchy. Resources are being plundered to enrich the few at the expense of the many.

Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and Governor Jennifer Granholm are demanding that teachers return to work to avoid "irreparable harm" to the schools. What a fraud! These politicians and their Democratic and Republican predecessors have overseen the systematic run-down of the schools, along with every other aspect of life for working class families in Detroit.

They are responsible for budget cuts, school closings and

layoffs. They have drained resources from the public schools to provide tax breaks for big business and windfalls for real estate speculators.

On a national scale, whether a Democrat or a Republican has occupied the White House, funding for public education has been gutted, while school vouchers, charter schools and reactionary policies like “No Child Left Behind” have been promoted to privatize public education and enrich hucksters cashing in on the multibillion-dollar “education market.”

America’s ruling elite has abandoned any commitment to public education. It is solely concerned with enriching itself and waging wars for oil which cost billions of dollars a day, in addition to thousands of lives. While working people have seen their meager paychecks eaten up by higher health care, fuel and education costs, corporate America is enjoying a golden age of profitability.

The Democratic Party, which has run Detroit for decades, defends the same profit system as Bush and the Republicans. That is why any serious struggle, such as the fight of the Detroit teachers, pits the working class in a direct confrontation with the Democratic Party.

Over the years, teachers, parents and students have waged one struggle after another to defend public education. There have been strikes, student walkouts, protests at school board meetings, wildcat job actions and recall petition drives. All of these struggles, however, have failed to stop the assault on the schools, not because they lacked determination, but because, in the end, the union officials channeled them into hopeless appeals to the Democratic Party.

In fact, the DFT and the AFL-CIO bureaucracy make up a good portion of the Democratic Party apparatus in Detroit and Michigan. While isolating the teachers, they are busy promoting the reelection of Governor Granholm, a defender of big business and enemy of the teachers.

It is necessary to adopt a new political strategy.

I urge teachers to break the grip of the DFT leadership and mount a powerful political campaign to rally parents, students and all working people throughout Detroit and the suburbs. This movement must insist that the needs of working people take priority over corporate profits. It should demand:

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, history 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.

The running-down of the Detroit public schools, along with the elimination of tens of thousands of decent-paying industrial jobs, is one of the chief causes of the mass exodus from Detroit, which has lost half its population since 1950. Thousands of people in my district—from Southfield, Royal Oak, Warren, Oak Park—are former Detroiters who were forced to leave the city, which now has the distinction of being the second poorest big city in America. But working people in the suburbs are facing the same attacks, and it is time all workers—black, white and immigrant—wage a common struggle to defend jobs and living standards and guarantee the next generation a high-quality education and secure future.

I am the only candidate who fights for this program. I urge you to support my campaign and the Socialist Equality Party’s fight to build a genuine, socialist alternative to the Democrats and Republicans.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact