SEP public meeting

Political lessons of the Detroit teachers strike

Our reporter
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The Socialist Equality Party held a public meeting Thursday, September 14, one day after Detroit teachers voted narrowly to end their more than two-week-long strike. They had defied a court injunction issued the previous Friday ordering them to return to work.

The new contract includes an estimated $60 million in concessions, and was opposed by a substantial section of teachers at last Wednesday's meeting. Teachers returned to work on the basis of their previous contract, pending a mail ballot on a tentative agreement approved by the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) the day before.

Issues arising in the strike were addressed at the SEP meeting last Thursday, which was held at the Northwest Activities Center on Detroit's west side and was attended by teachers, parents and students. Ed Bergonzi, a veteran Detroit teacher, was the first speaker.

"The 16-day strike and the resulting vote to return to work yesterday contains important lessons for teachers, and for all Detroit-area workers, that must be discussed and assimilated," Bergonzi said.

"At the center of the lessons teachers need to draw out of this experience is the urgent necessity for a new political movement of the working class, and the driving out of this movement of the so-called 'labor leaderships' of the various unions, including the Detroit Federation of Teachers.

"Already the school district feels emboldened to talk about more school closings and additional layoffs, now that the teachers are safely back in the classroom. The remarks by School Superintendent William Coleman following yesterday's mass meeting were significant because he is adopting the 'cost-cutting' language used by the DFT leadership and DFT President Janna Garrison to justify a new round of school closings and teachers' layoffs.

"He was then joined by School Board President Jimmy Womack, who chimed in about a further contraction of the district.

"What we have to consider is how it was that the undeniable determination of teachers to beat back the concessions drive of the school district resulted in a return to work and a prospective agreement which, while not containing the harsh concessions originally demanded by the board, is a rotten agreement that divides the membership, pitting the younger, newer teachers hired after 1992 against the older veteran teachers, many of whom must now be considering retirement.

"The answer to this question requires an examination of the conduct of the strike by Garrison and the DFT leadership, their perspective and the line-up of enemies of the teachers and of public education that assembled for all to see at the Tuesday press conference. Assembled was a rogues' gallery of the forces arrayed against the teachers—Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, Coleman, Womack and a selection of so-called 'community leaders,' along with a thoroughly demoralized and beaten down Janna Garrison.

"If one were to look at the anatomy of the strike in stages, it could be entitled 'A Tale of Three Meetings." The first meeting, August 28, in which teachers voted overwhelmingly to strike with little discussion, and with the Garrison leadership's consent; the middle meeting, in which teachers almost unanimously walked out in defiance of Judge Susan Borman's back-to-work order; and the final meeting, yesterday, in which the union leadership succeeded in splitting the membership.

"From the first meeting to the last, striking teachers enjoyed the unflinching support and sympathy of tens, if not hundred of thousands of workers, parents, students, even small businessmen, despite a vicious media campaign vilifying the teachers.

"This continuous support by masses of people demonstrates that this was more than a labor management dispute, more than simply a strike, but had the potential of becoming a social and political movement, which in fact it was. Workers looked to us with admiration, seeing in the strike a way forward against the constant demands of big business and its political representatives in the Democratic and Republican parties that they give up more.

"They had expectations of us and the outcome of our fight. But we faced an obstacle: the refusal of the DFT leadership to mount any campaign to actively mobilize that support, as well as the utter silence of the UAW and the AFL-CIO unions. Not even lip service! Everything was done to maintain the isolation of the strike and keep at arms length the workers who supported us.

"The so-called 'friends of labor' in the union bureaucracies who pathetically marched in the Labor Day parade September 4 paid virtually no attention to us or the Northwest Airlines flight attendants who attended. In his remarks from the speakers' platform, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney made no mention of the teachers' strike, nor did Democratic congressmen John Conyers and Sander Levin or Governor Granholm.

"The DFT leadership is both unwilling to and incapable of waging such a fight because they accept the whole rotten framework within which these disputes are worked out. They accept as unchallengeable the accumulation of huge concentrations of wealth by a ruling elite, and the allocation of profits by this elite as they see fit; casinos and land developments for the rich, while ordinary Detroiters must pay $300 a year for garbage collection. No money for education is the refrain, and yet charter schools can be opened with impunity, with underpaid and largely poorly trained teachers and support staff.

"This ruling elite is awash in wealth, showering themselves with bonuses and salaries grossly out of proportion to their own abilities and worth. Coleman and his wife take in $400,000 a year presiding over the poorest school district in the country.

"The Democratic and Republican parties are joined at the hip in defense of this oligarchy and their policies. They have voted for and continue to support endless war, fear-mongering, erosion of democratic rights and the destruction of living conditions, whether it be in New Orleans or Detroit.

"The notion that every citizen is entitled to free and public education has a long history in this country, dating back to the first decades of the nineteenth century. In fact, Michigan was one of the leaders in the

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movement for public education, even as it was fighting for statehood. Great educators like Horace Mann and later John Dewey viewed education as a great democratizing and equalizing endeavor.

"Suffice it to say that the defense of the capitalist profit system is incompatible with the defense of public education, even the right to be educated, and the right of teachers and the working class to economic security."

Next to address the meeting was Jerome White, the SEP's candidate for US Congress in Michigan's 12th Congressional District.

"The last two weeks of struggle by the Detroit teachers have uncovered political truths, which the media and big business politicians are doing their best to conceal from the working class.

"The teachers took a stand not only for themselves—to reverse the years of declining living standards—but to defend public education in Detroit, which has been steadily starved of funding for decades. Behind them stood the overwhelming majority of working people in Detroit—parents, students, city workers and other workers—who sympathized and identified with their fight.

"On the other side was the entire corporate and political establishment in the city and state. Democrats, such as Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and Governor Jennifer Granholm, denounced the teachers for hurting school children by striking. The circuit court judge threatened the teachers with fines and arrests. Finally, business leaders and the media insisted there simply was no money to meet the teachers' demands.

"These forces were all mobilized to defend the economic and political setup in Detroit, which has allowed corporate CEOs and various hucksters to enrich themselves by systematically dismantling public education, privatizing services and driving down the wages and living standards of working people. This has included the outright looting of public funds through the tax breaks and subsidies the successive Democratic administrations have handed over to big business.

"All of the so-called 'friends of labor' Democrats, like my opponent, 12-term Congressman Sander Levin, stood silently by as all the instruments of the state were mobilized to intimidate and defeat the teachers.

"From the beginning, however, the teachers showed enormous determination and resilience. They ignored the provocations of the news media and the insults of the school board, the mayor and governor. Faced with the threat of being fined and arrested they were defiant. After years of lies by school officials, misappropriation of school funds and budget-cutting and concession demands, the teachers knew they were fighting for a just cause and they knew the majority of people stood behind them.

"So how was it possible that after waging a determined fight for more than two weeks and expending all of this energy the teachers were forced to accept such a rotten deal? After a one-year wage freeze, teachers will see wage increases over the next two years that fail to keep up with the rate of inflation, and they will also be forced to pay higher out-of-pocket expenses for healthcare. None of their demands for improved teaching conditions were realized, and immediately after the settlement school officials announced plans to shut down 50 schools.

"This contract more resembled what workers would be compelled to accept if their strike had been smashed. But that wasn't the position of the teachers. Their strike had been solid; they had won mass support. Yet, in the end, they were forced to accept massive concessions. What accounts for this state of affairs?

"The answer lies in the fact that the teachers' strike was deliberately sabotaged by the leaders of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, the United Auto Workers, AFSCME and the other unions. The teachers had been involved in a direct confrontation with the Democratic Party establishment in the city and the state. Their demands—for economic security and educational improvements—cut across the economic prerogatives of the corporate interests that dominate the city and control the Democratic Party. It was not possible for the teachers to wage a struggle against the Democratic Party, when their organization, the DFT, is run by agents of the Democratic Party.

"Historical analogies are limited but I'd like to make one that might help illustrate the crisis of leadership that confronts teachers and for that matter, the entire working class.

"During the early years of the American Civil War, the Northern armies were plagued by mismanagement and indecision that allowed the Confederate troops who, in many cases, were less equipped and less numerous, to score victories and paralyze the Union. Lincoln grew increasingly angry with General George McClellan—who led the Army of the Potomac—because he refused to aggressively pursue the Confederate army, cut off its retreat and destroy it.

"Finally Lincoln was forced to remove McClellan and find generals, such as Grant and Sherman, who were willing to wage total war against the Confederacy. It soon became clear that McClellan's reluctance to fight was bound up with his sympathy towards the Southern slaveholders. McClellan opposed the Emancipation Proclamation and in 1864 he ran against Lincoln as the Democratic presidential nominee on a platform of pursuing a peaceful settlement with the South that would leave slavery intact. In other words, McClellan's refusal to fight was bound up with the political and economic interests he represented.

"I make that point because for the last 25 years—since the smashing of the PATCO air traffic controllers—workers have faced defeat after defeat, not because they lacked determination, but because their struggles have been isolated and betrayed by a labor bureaucracy that functions as the representatives, not of the working class, but of the Democratic Party in the labor movement. In that capacity, they serve as defenders of modern day wage-slavery, that is, the capitalist profit system.

"While the Democrats pose as friends of working people they defend the same ruling elite in America as the Bush administration and the Republicans. Both parties have been waging a war on behalf of corporate America against the jobs and living standards of the working class. Wages and salaries today are the lowest share of the GDP since 1947, while profits are at the highest level since the 1960s. This is being described as a 'golden age of profitability' for corporate America. As one investment banker noted, 'The most important contributor to higher profit margins over the past five years has been a decline in labor's share of national income.'

"The teachers' struggle raised the most essential political question: who is to decide how the wealth created by working people is to be distributed and utilized? Are society's resources to be used to enrich a greedy minority, to fund criminal wars for the seizure of Middle East oil, or to provide the best means possible to educate its youth?

"I reject the claim that there is no money for public education. In addition to the thousands of lost lives, the war in Iraq alone has cost $315 billion, enough to hire 5 million more teachers around the US. If the cost of the war is broken down by cities, it has cost Detroit a half a billion dollars, or enough to hire 9,170 new teachers, enough to double the existing number of instructors in the city. I demand an end to this criminal war.

"If elected I would immediately halt the massive tax breaks for the Big Three auto companies and the subsidies for casinos, sports stadiums and upscale housing that has drained millions from the public schools and other services.

"The fact is society can no longer afford the rich and their voracious appetites. If Michigan's richest 100 executives were forced to live on $100,000 or even $200,000 a year, instead of multimillion dollar salaries, there would be more than enough to meet the teachers' demands for decent salaries and improved working conditions. In 2005, William Clay Ford Jr., the head of the number two automaker, raked in $13,298,279, while General Motors CEO Richard Wagoner pulled in $5,479,305.

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"Detroit also has its own share of billionaires on *Fortune* list of the richest Americans. Richard DeVos, the founder of Amway and owner of the Orlando Magic basketball team who is running as the Republican candidate for governor, is worth $3 billion. Worth $2.8 billion is William Davidson, owner of Guardian Glass and the Detroit Pistons and Detroit Shock basketball teams.

"Ronda Stryker, who inherited a large portion of the medical supply company Stryker, is worth $2.1 billion. Then there is truck leasing and auto parts manufacturing magnate Roger Penske ($1.7 billion) and William Pulte ($1.5 billion) of Detroit, the owner of the nation's largest home building company. The list ends with shopping mall magnate Alfred Taubman, Masco and Delta faucet owner Richard Manoogian and William Ford Sr., who are also billionaires.

"The idea that there is no money for children to enjoy the best possible learning conditions is a lie. But Democrats, like Kilpatrick, Granholm and my opponent Sander Levin, are just as opposed as Bush and the Republicans to any serious redistribution of wealth from the top downward. All of their policies are directed at continuing to redistribute the wealth upward by taking it from social programs, wages and benefits. To a great extent these politicians, including my Democratic opponent Levin, are themselves part of the wealthiest one percent of the population, which has enriched itself at the expense of working people.

"The leading Detroit Public School officials typify the corruption and avarice of the elite who run this city. The *Michigan Chronicle* recently did an exposé of School Superintendent William Coleman and how he channeled millions of dollars in technology contracts to so-called minority-owned businesses, that turned out not to be businesses at all. Some were no more than one-man operations without any equipment. The newspaper said Coleman was involved in similar dubious operations while the chief financial officer of the Dallas and San Francisco school systems.

"The experience with Coleman and other Democrats like Mayor Kilpatrick puts to rest all the claims that the election of African American officials and the elevation of black entrepreneurs would advance the interests of minority workers. On the contrary, they are no less hostile to the working class than their white counterparts in the political and corporate establishment. They all want to break up the public education system through privatization and the expansion of charter schools in order to cash in on what big investors call the multibillion-dollar 'education market.'

"All workers are confronting a common struggle. Many of those in my district, which is made up of the northern suburbs of Detroit, are former Detroiters who left because of the destruction of jobs by the auto industry and the repeated cutting of public services, including education. These workers in Macomb and Oakland counties are facing attacks on their jobs and living standards also, and the conditions exist to wage a powerful struggle, uniting black, white and immigrant workers in a common struggle.

"This requires breaking with the Democratic Party and the corporate dictatorship it defends. Workers must build a political party based on a socialist program that will insist that human needs, not corporate profit, take precedence. We call for billions of dollars to be poured into public education, a halt to the subsidies for charter schools, and for the establishment of genuine democratic control of the school system by committees of teachers, parents, students and other school employees.

"The auto industry, which plays such a crucial role in the fate of the public schools, must be placed under public ownership, so that the wealth created by working people can be used to meet their needs and fulfill one of society's most important obligations, the educational and cultural enrichment of its youth.

"I urge you to begin a serious discussion among teachers, parents and young people on the program of the Socialist Equality Party, to support our election campaign and to join and build our party as the socialist alternative for the working class." magazine's

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