

Detroit teachers hold strike rally

Joe Kay

9 September 2006

Thousands of teachers rallied on Friday at Fisher Auditorium in downtown Detroit, voicing their anger over demands from school administrators that they accept pay and benefit cuts.

The mood among teachers attending the rally was generally angry and defiant, with many insisting that they would not accept another contract that involved concessions. The size of the demonstration itself was an indication of the opposition among teachers. Fifty percent or more of the 9,500 members of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) attended the rally.

There was, however, no presence at the rally of the DFT leadership. No speeches were given to those assembled. Janna Garrison, the union president, stopped by the rally but did not say anything to the teachers, merely making a few comments to the press.

Also noticeable was the absence of any presence from other unions in the AFL-CIO. Teachers reported that they have received enormous support from residents of Detroit, other workers and parents—support that was evident in the blaring of horns of cars passing by the demonstration. However, the unions have done nothing to mobilize this support against the assault on jobs and wages.

These are among the many signs that the union leadership is preparing a sellout of the teachers.

At the rally, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party handed out copies of the statement, “Victory for the Detroit Teachers” and interviewed several workers.

Gregory, a teacher at Douglas Alternative for 38 years, spoke about the broader issues behind the teachers’ struggle. “They are trying to dismantle public schools,” he said. “The first thing they want to do is dismantle the union. We are watching this very closely. For years we have gone along with concessions. We wouldn’t accept the same deal now.”

“The bottom line is, they are taking money out of education—to finance the war, for one thing,” Gregory

said. “We could easily fund Detroit schools with that money.”

“An attack on public education is an assault on the middle class,” he said. “This is a class struggle. For people to move up, it starts with education. They are putting this country at risk. There are a few people making a billion dollars, and the rest of us are losing. This is not just in Detroit. This is a national thing. But they know that if they can attack public education in Detroit, they can pull it off in the rest of the country.”

John, a teacher at Heilmann Elementary for 26 years, said that the attack on teachers was part of a nationwide assault. “It’s private industry and their lobbyists that make—buy—the policies,” he said. “They want to privatize education, push charter schools for profit. How do you privatize education? You have to break the unions and destroy the public school system.”

Many teachers raised the issue of charter schools—including private religious schools—which have become much more common in Detroit as the public schools have deteriorated. One teacher held a homemade sign reading: “Why are there so many ministers in our school mix? They are opening church schools with public money.”

Ray, a teacher at Joy Middle School, said: “This is about wasted money. They have been wasting money for 30 years—on administration, on big contracts to outside corporations. They are paying Aramark \$16 million a year for food service, but all they are is a layer of bureaucracy. Administrators are paid big salaries.

“What we need to do is go in and open up the books, so we can examine all these contracts,” he said.

“It was a big mistake,” Ray said, referring to a decision by teachers not to strike last year and accept a concessions contract. “We took a pay cut then, and now they are demanding more. How are we going to get by? I am not going to be able to pay for my housing soon.

This has been going on for years and years. Now we've had it."

Carver, another teacher at Joy, said that the administrators had starved the schools of funds. "The schools are filthy. There are broken dishes and tables, water fountains that don't work, toilets that don't work."

Carver spoke about the role of school district superintendent William Coleman and his history, noting that he is a protégé of former Republican governor John Engler. "He is the last of Engler's boys," Carver said. "They wanted to 'revolutionize' the Detroit education system, but they haven't done one iota for the schools, and instead have been paying themselves off."

Audrey, a teacher at the Blackwell Institute, said, "Teachers wouldn't mind a pay freeze; they just won't accept any more concessions, particularly on benefits. William Coleman is making about \$250,000 a year. What concessions is he giving?"

She noted that Coleman has a background in finance, not in teaching. Many teachers at the rally raised this fact, and one of the frequent chants was, "Coleman: You should have been a teacher." There is general antipathy toward the school administrators, who are seen as self-serving and corrupt.

"What has been done with the money that they got from our concessions?" Audrey asked. "No one knows." She blamed the mismanagement of funds by school administrators for the problems the district is facing.

Linda, another teacher at the Blackwell Institute, also raised the question of the management of funds for education. "Where does the money for the lottery go?" she asked. "That is supposed to pay for education, but we don't know what it's spent on."

Paul, a young teacher from Nolan Middle School with six years' experience, said he thought the main issue was that the administration has no respect for the teachers. "We are what drives education," he said. "Without teachers, no one can learn. Most teachers here aren't in it for the money. We are teaching because we care about what we are doing.... We've compromised year after year, and we're just fed up. We feel stepped on, targeted, underappreciated."

Steve, a teacher at the automotive center of the Golightly Career and Tech Center for 15 years, said

that the cuts in education funding meant that he didn't have books with which to teach last year. "We are not getting the money that is supposed to be allocated to our area," he said. "If the schools had enough money, we could fund everything that is needed. They have the same problems in other school districts."

Joe, a teacher for 12 years and the union representative at Golightly, explained some of the problems faced by teachers. "Relative to other schools, Detroit teachers get paid less," he said. "But we have a lot to overcome here. Kids who come to school hungry, who come to school cold in the winter because their homes have no heat. We are trying to provide a safe haven for these kids. I took a big pay cut to become a teacher. We all do it because we love the kids. We want to make a change. But things are tough, with rising gas prices, food prices. And they want to give us a pay cut now."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact