

US: Mass layoffs, cutbacks signal further disintegration of Detroit public schools

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8 July 2008

At a specially convened session June 30, the Detroit Public Schools Board of Education voted 9 to 2 to initiate draconian cuts in school jobs and services. The two-year plan, designed to cover a more than \$408 million deficit, was hastily enacted under threat that the district would be forced to suspend its summer operations with the ending of the fiscal year.

The board is also under pressure to demonstrate “fiscal responsibility” or face the prospect of a second state takeover of the Detroit school system. The first such takeover occurred nearly a decade ago during the administration of Republican Governor John Engler.

With the new round of cuts, as many as 1,700 school employees, including 810 teachers and support personnel, will be laid off. The teacher layoffs amount to more than 10 percent of the district’s teachers. Hundreds more office, custodial and food service workers will lose their jobs and vacant positions will be left unfilled.

The board will also consider a new round of school closings during the 2009-2010 school year. Last year the district closed a number of schools, including several high schools, with disastrous results. The recklessness of the closures led to overcrowded elementary schools in adjacent neighborhoods, increased gang violence at schools that experienced a large and sudden influx of new students, as well as the systematic looting of the closed buildings’ infrastructures and the loss of students’ records.

Other budget cuts include a “realignment” of transportation services, which will force many more students to take their chances with an already decrepit public transport system, as well as central office cutbacks that will further reduce money for already scarce school supplies. Money for school trips and necessary equipment will also be drastically reduced; in other words, everything that has traditionally characterized a functioning school district is being systematically

eliminated.

Teachers will face a new round of wages and benefits concessions demands by the district. The new budget will forestall, if not eliminate, the 2.5 percent pay increase scheduled to take effect in September, the beginning of the final year of the three-year contract that was the result of the 16-day teachers strike at the start of the 2006 school year. The language of the budget includes the following: “Delay union and non-union salary increases and restore concessions, this has to be negotiated, all concessions removed in 4th year.” What this means is that teachers and other school personnel will likely face payless paydays during the 2008-2009 school year, as well as demands for further wages and benefits concessions as contract negotiations resume, if, in fact, there is to be a “new” contract.

While this latest round of cutbacks is being justified with the usual mantras of having to align the district with declining enrollment, and of being in compliance with state mandated budgetary requirements, the reality is that these cuts only accelerate the disintegration of the district, further opening the door to privatization and the spread of charter schools. Like a starving man whose body feeds on itself to delay the inevitable, there is a threshold beyond which no amount of cuts to a school system will stave off collapse.

Last year’s enrollment of 106,000 students, a figure that was actually higher than many projections, still represented a loss of 12,000 students from the previous year, and will likely cost the district \$90 million in state aid. If enrollment drops to below 100,000 students for the 2008-2009 school year—a likely prospect—the district could lose its status as a large school system and the spread of charter schools would likely be unrestricted. Such a turn of events would have the complete support of Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, a Democrat, who has long championed the spread of privatization in the city’s

education system.

For years, the Detroit Public School (DPS) system has been systematically dismantled by a lethal combination of corruption and incompetence. At last Monday's meeting, the school board, as if to contrast its attack on school employees and services, felt compelled to launch a lawsuit to attempt to recover \$45 million in allegedly unauthorized contracts awarded by the district's Risk Management Office headed by Stephen Hill to friends and business associates. Both Hill and his assistant Christina Polk-Osumah are named in the lawsuit.

However, this belated attempt to address the rampant corruption and cronyism that has been the hallmark of the management of the DPS only highlights the class divisions in Detroit, in which a layer of urban petty bourgeois view the city and its largely working class residents as its own private cash trough.

For its part the Detroit Federation of Teachers, the union representing over 6,000 teachers and support personnel, has had very little to say. Only a perfunctory article on the budget cuts appears on the union's web site. DFT President Virginia Cantrell's remarks at the board meeting were confined to a plaintive appeal to the board to stop trying to balance the school district's finances off the back of its employees, and to the Michigan state legislature to change the classification of the Detroit schools so that further declines in enrollment will not result in reduced funding.

It should come as no surprise that the DFT has been reduced to virtual speechlessness in the face of the growing catastrophe confronting Detroit's public schools. The union leadership, and its various and sundry factions, including that of its "left" wing represented by the Civil Rights Action Now caucus led by Steve Conn, advance no perspective beyond that of trade union militancy and the occasional "radical" protest—in reality, activities that appeal to the very same Democratic Party politicians that are pushing the school privatization agenda.



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