

Detroit students demonstrate against school restructuring

900 jobs to be eliminated, 50 schools closed

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21 May 2009

Hundreds of students demonstrated against the firing of their principals at two Detroit high schools this week, as the school district prepares mass firings and school closures.

The demonstrations took place at Western International High School on Monday and Kettering High School on Wednesday. Students and parents spoke out against the plans of Robert Bobb, the Detroit Public School District's "emergency financial manager," to close 50 schools (including 29 this year) and fire 33 principals.

Bobb said on Tuesday that he plans to eliminate 900 teacher and staff jobs as part of drastic cost-cutting measures. This is about 6 percent of the district's employees.

According to a *Detroit News* report, Bobb (who is paid \$260,000 a year), "said he plans to balance the budget by June, which requires eliminating a \$306 million deficit sooner than he anticipated ... through vast cost-cutting measures, right down to examining the cost of binders used for budgetary books."

The bulk of the cuts, however, will not come from cutting back on binders, but from layoffs and school closings. Bobb is also looking for major concessions from teachers and is counting on the union to force through cuts. "More tough decisions are to come, with some changes being sought within the Detroit Federation of Teachers union contract," the *News* reported. "Bobb has said he is seeking an innovative contract, and negotiations are starting this month."

The DFT and the American Federation of Teachers are planning a mass meeting Tuesday to prepare teachers for accepting major changes to their contract.

The Obama administration is spearheading the cuts. The president sees Detroit as a model for implementing education "reform." Education Secretary Arne Duncan visited Detroit last week to demand an "absolutely fundamental overhaul" to the education system, including closing schools, firing teachers and staff, expanding charter

schools, increasing testing, and introducing merit pay for teachers.

Federal aid to the schools is being made conditional on implementing these changes.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to students participating in the high school demonstrations on Monday and Wednesday. At the demonstration at Kettering, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for Detroit mayor, D'Artagnan Collier, distributed a statement denouncing the cuts. (See "Oppose school closures! Stop the shut down of Detroit!—A socialist response to the crisis in education")

Western International High School

The protest at Western International High School on the west side of the city involved the entire school body of more than 1,000 students and lasted several hours on Monday. Students and staff members demonstrated against the planned layoff of the school's principal, Rebecca Luna.

Davante, a freshman at Western, said, "I don't like the way they treated the principal. I think it is wrong the way that they fired her." Davante said he was told the principal was fired because of low test scores at the school.

Arthur said he thought they should keep the principal. "She's always prepared to help you. She actually cares about the students. If you have a problem you can go and speak to her, like you are supposed to be able to do."

School closures are being justified on the grounds that the number of students attending Detroit schools has declined. In fact, classrooms are overcrowded, making teaching that much more difficult.

Vanessa, a sophomore, said she understood that the district planned to close nearby Chadsey and Southwestern high

schools. Many of the students would be coming to Western, making the classes even more overcrowded. “The classrooms need to be smaller. As it is we don’t have proper textbooks. The ones we have are old and worn out,” she said.

Vanessa added that the school attracts many Hispanic students who do not speak English as their first language. “It is very difficult to keep the test scores up here because we have a lot of students who do not speak English in the school. Principal Luna fights so hard to keep everybody coming to school, even if they have difficulties, and it shows.”

Antonio said he was opposed to the firing of the principal. “It’s wrong. Why don’t they do something about the classroom size? My smallest class has 25 students, but they average in the 30s.

“They always say there is no money,” Anthony said, “But I see they have money for everything else, like the banks.”

Larhonda, another student at Western, said that the school has a good reputation and attracts students from all over, including Macomb County. “It’s an international school with students from Cuba or even Mexico. People really want to come here because they know they can get a good education.”

Larhonda’s mother, Rhonda, also spoke to the WSWS. “I am absolutely opposed to the firing of Ms. Luna. She is a wonderful principal. In fact, I live close to Cody High School but I would rather my daughter take two buses and come here because I know she will get a good education.”

Asked why they were trying to get rid of the principal, Rhonda replied, “I think it is because she cares for low-income students,” said Ms. Smith. “She really cares for them and that could be a problem.”

“I called Bobb’s office and asked him to come down to the school, and I don’t get a response. I called and asked if he would have a meeting with the parents, and I didn’t get a response. We are going to have to fight this. I plan to get together with other parents and organize a fight against this.”

Kettering High School

Kettering is located on the east side of Detroit in a distressed neighborhood. After support for a walkout spread among students, school administrators decided to let the students out for about half an hour Wednesday morning to demonstrate against the planned firing of their principal, Ms. Willie Howard. The students marched along a service drive

of the freeway, where cars and trucks honked their horns in support.

Kettering student Daniel told the WSWS, “They’re shutting schools and taking away our education. Our principal was an inspiration to us. We already have a tough environment to learn in. The district is cutting 10 percent from the budget each year. They want our school to be a poor school. The director of the school board is making \$275,000 a year. They don’t spend that much money on our school in three years.”

Derrell, a sophomore, said he was opposed to the school cuts. “I think Ms. Howard is a good principal. She cares about the students. I also don’t think they should cut the teachers or close the schools. They should be able to find the money somewhere.”

Gloria Paton, the mother of a high school senior, said she was strongly opposed to changing the administration. “If they cut these schools the kids will be out in the street,” she said. “There are enough kids from Detroit in the juvenile justice system as it is. This will only make it worse. I believe if they make these cuts there will be kids either in juvenile or the graveyard because there is nothing out there for them without an education.”

She continued, “Although I live on the west side I brought my daughter here because it is a good school. She was at Martin Luther King High School before here and it was very bad. In one of the classrooms they had 60 students in class. Kids would rush to class to get a seat because otherwise you would be sitting on the floor.”

“I really think this school is wonderful. My daughter is an honor student and wants to become a doctor. Through the school she is in a program with the Detroit Allied Health Middle College and Wayne County Community College. When she graduates from here she will also have an associate’s degree. They have gone all-out for her.”

Jonathan took several of the flyers with the SEP statement and handed them out to other students. He said, “I am really disappointed. I think [Howard] is a nice lady. She is someone you can talk to. I was suspended and she had it revoked.”



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