

Unions and Detroit school board hold meeting to prepare for concessions

Teachers voice opposition to cuts and school closings

Our reporting team

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The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) called a meeting of all Detroit teachers on Tuesday to prepare them for concessions in pay and benefits as part of upcoming contract negotiations. Both organizations are actively collaborating with the city government and Obama administration to implement school closings and cost-cutting.

Teachers were required to gather in Detroit's Cobo Hall, where they were addressed by union executives and school board officials before being sent to separate schools for workshops on "professional development." The workshops are designed to prepare teachers for retrograde contract revisions, including some form of merit pay.

There was no open microphone for teachers to speak out. Instead, questions were vetted through the submission of cards to a panel, allowing union officials to weed out any oppositional comments. Many teachers expressed anger and frustration at the meeting.

Robert Bobb, the Detroit School Board "emergency financial manager," was featured prominently in the event's list of speakers. Bobb has spearheaded the attack on public education in Detroit, recently announcing the closure of 29 schools this year, along with 900 layoffs. He is demanding massive cost-cutting to balance the district's \$300 million budget deficit.

Given Bobb's role, the very fact that he was invited by the unions to speak before the assembled teachers demonstrates that these organizations are planning to

push through a massive sell-out contract before the beginning of the next school year in the fall.

During the entire meeting, the union officials did not once mention the school closings or layoffs, which have generated deep opposition among students, teachers, and Detroit residents.

Detroit Federation of Teachers president Keith Johnson set the tone of the meeting in his opening remarks, proclaiming that it was necessary to "incorporate some revolutionary and innovative ideas, some of which are popular, some of which are not popular."

The remarks of Bobb and the union officials were indistinguishable. They consisted of platitudes about the need for the union and management to "work together" to solve Detroit's educational problems. Bobb proclaimed the need to "create centers of excellence in every school, to create centers of excellence for every child, to create centers of excellence in every neighborhood." He did not attempt to reconcile this pious wish with his demand that 29 of these "centers" must be shut down.

The central theme of Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, was the need for a "labor management collaboration." Her lengthy and demagogic speech cited the success stories of individual students from Detroit in order to promote the conception that every child in the city could succeed without any fundamental improvement in funding and resources for the public schools.

Weingarten made an explicit appeal for teachers to work with Democratic party politicians, including

Michigan governor Jennifer Granholm and the Democratic Party. All these government officials are in fact pushing for cuts and school closures. Treasury Secretary Arne Duncan was in Detroit earlier this month to give Bobb the support of the Obama administration.

She made a special appeal to the school administration to “think of us as partners in this endeavor; to work with us rather than against us.”

The role of the DFT and the AFT in relationship to education is the same as the role of the United Auto Workers in relationship to the crisis in the auto industry. These “trade unions” are actively working with the government and corporations to impose concessions on the working class.

At the meeting, Socialist Equality Party supporters distributed the statement, “Defend education! Defend jobs! Defend the youth! Stop the shutdown of Detroit!”. The leaflet advertised a meeting next week in Detroit.

Many of the teachers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* before and after the meeting expressed outrage and anger. There is overwhelming opposition to the school closures, and it is precisely for this reason that the union wanted no discussion on what is taking place.

Patricia, a Detroit teacher, said: “Our union is against us. This meeting was a farce; it was disgusting. They talked about a lot of things that didn’t matter, but in the end it all boiled down to: ‘concession time!’

“The corporations caused the problems,” she added. “We have no control over society. The rich are only getting richer from all of this; they’re the ones who benefit, they’re the ones who get bailed out.”

Elizabeth, a sophomore at Wayne State University, came out to the meeting in support of the teachers. She said, “The audacity of these concessions is just gross.”

Aside from the content of the meeting, many teachers were angered by the poorly organized character of the meeting—one expression of the deep disconnect between the union and the teachers. Several teachers said they could not express an opinion of the speakers because they could not hear what was being said.

Karen, another Detroit teacher, said, “What a waste

of time. Do they think we’re stupid? Do they think we’ll just take concessions because they stood up there for two hours and talked nonsense? They’re saying ‘thank you so much for coming.’ They made us come, and they made us pay \$10 for parking at their stupid pep rally. They want to shove concessions down our throats, and they’re just trying to distract us.”

Elizabeth, a teacher, said: “It was all rhetoric what they said. I am so against the cuts, but they never spoke about what is going on. They never mentioned pay, health care, longer hours, school closings—the things we can all connect with. What about my student loans—\$25,000? All they did was preach to us.

“They talk about the importance of community. Once you close down schools—it kills the community. They always say they care about kids, but they don’t. They want to stick 40 kids in the room and treat them like they are in college. They aren’t. They need attention; they’re kids. We do our kids an injustice all the time.

“We knew we were coming down here for nothing, but we had to come anyway,” Elizabeth added.



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