

Detroit schools “financial czar” orders teachers to reapply for their jobs

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25 July 2009

2,600 Detroit Public School teachers, counselors and administrators from nearly 50 schools have been forced to reapply for their jobs at the schools where they teach. All of these supposedly “failed” schools are being “reconstituted” as mandated under the Bush administration’s 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

The punitive provisions of NCLB are being ruthlessly carried out by the Detroit Public Schools emergency financial manager, Robert Bobb, who enjoys the complete support of the Obama administration and its education secretary, Arne Duncan.

Bobb was appointed in March by Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, a Democrat, to oversee the financial operations of the Detroit schools. Since his appointment, he has assumed dictatorial powers over every aspect of the district’s functioning; closing 29 schools, laying off thousands of teachers and support staff, and hiring private education management firms to impose their curricula and methods on schools slated for restructuring.

The latter development has created something of a sideshow involving the Detroit school board and Bobb. The board is claiming that Bobb has overstepped his authority as financial czar by imposing his agenda on the education process. However, the board’s complaints are self-serving. Its members want input into the process of virtually dismantling public education in Detroit.

Predictably, board members have had nothing to say about the fact that teachers, some with decades of success in the school system, have been forced to justify why they should be retained at schools where they have taught for years.

The degrading procedure began without warning on Monday, when letters went out and phone calls were made instructing teachers that they had to make arrangements to be interviewed by their respective

principals no later than Thursday, or face the possibility of losing their position at that school. Teachers who, because of the summer recess, could not be reached are being left to their own devices.

While there may still be a narrow window of opportunity for these teachers to be retained at their schools, they, along with those employees who were told at their interviews that their services would no longer be needed, will have to wait to be assigned to a new position by attending a “jobs fair” to be held during the first week of August. Laid-off teachers are, for the most part, ineligible to participate in this week’s interviews, and many will have to wait until the beginning of the school year, when vacancies that need to be filled appear in their subject areas.

Some teachers were visibly shaken by the process. Others were angry, but reserved, uncertain of the criteria by which they would be judged.

A teacher at Charles F. Kettering High School wanted to know what the union (Detroit Federation of Teachers—DFT) was doing: “I found the process degrading and an insult to our profession,” she said.

“I think that the union should have directed us to have more backbone. This procedure that we were put through today was a travesty. It looks like only the beginning. If our union doesn’t step up and do something, I’m sure there’s more to come. Why are we paying union dues when there are members who are being ousted from their positions without union representation?”

The DFT leadership, which has for months sowed illusions that financial czar Bobb was amenable to negotiations, has been revealed as both unwilling and incapable of mounting any serious response to the frontal assault on the job security of teachers.

Initially, DFT President Keith Johnson, when pressed at a recent meeting by a teacher about how to respond to the letters outlining the reapplication process, characterized

them as “drafts.” This was an attempt to sow illusions that no action would be taken until a later date.

As it became obvious that Bobb was proceeding at breakneck speed with the restructuring process, Johnson vowed to take legal action, claiming that forcing teachers to reapply constituted a violation of the collective bargaining agreement.

“Blatant disregard for the terms of the collective bargaining agreement will not be tolerated,” he said. “As much as they talk about ‘the emphasis is on the students,’ there is nothing about this that is in the interest of students. It’s going to be chaotic and have an adverse effect on students’ instruction, plain and simple.”

This comment demonstrates how susceptible the DFT leadership is to allegations that portray the interests of teachers as “selfish” and at variance with the interests of the children. Nothing could be further from the truth, a fact that most parents, students and those familiar with the challenges public school teachers face on a daily basis would freely acknowledge.

The education of urban and working class children—something about which the ruling elite of this country, represented by the likes of Bobb, Duncan and Obama, is indifferent—is entirely bound up with the economic and social well-being of the working class, teachers included. The very officials and politicians who are spearheading the attack on teachers in the guise of concern for students are overseeing a frontal assault on the jobs, wages and living standards of working people, including plans to slash spending on basic social programs such as Medicare and Medicaid.

The announcement on Friday that the Obama administration favors competition between schools, both public and charter, for federal funds will undoubtedly elicit the approval of the Wall Street financial establishment.

Obama’s scheme, dubbed “Race to the Top,” is nothing more than an acceleration of the attack on public education. Bobb’s recent threat to place the Detroit Public Schools in Chapter 9 bankruptcy is completely consistent with the thrust of the Obama administration’s education policy.

Bobb’s response this week to criticisms of his actions was characteristically arrogant. Having been president of the Board of Education in Washington DC, where he also served a stint as deputy mayor, as well as a Homeland Security advisor during the Bush administration, this career servant of the ruling elite simply replied, “This level of profound transformation is not only appropriate,

but necessary.”

Bobb’s underling, Steve Wasko, was coldly succinct: “There is a process between now and mid-August though which positions will be selected and filled. These staff members may apply.”

Bobb is proceeding from the standpoint that he is not bound by a union contract, since the previous contract expired June 30. Negotiations between Bobb and the union have been intermittent throughout the summer. By DFT President Johnson’s own admission, nothing substantive has been placed on the bargaining table. In fact, the negotiations have been a sham.

That Bobb is violating the seniority rights and job security of teachers is obvious. However, the union—both the DFT and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers—has, since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, intensified its collaboration with school officials in attacking teachers.

As far back as 2001, the DFT leadership, as part of the bargaining agreement, signed two “letters of understanding” with the district stating the union’s acceptance of the thrust of NCLB, agreeing that the “district had the responsibility to intervene when a school has been determined by the State of Michigan to have failed to make AYP.”

AYP stands for Adequate Yearly Progress. Under NCLB, schools that are deemed to be on the threshold of “failure” must show Adequate Yearly Progress in student achievement as indicated by higher standardized test scores.

While the “letters of understanding” also state that teachers will not be subject to disciplinary action as the result of any restructuring, Bobb, in a reference to the contract’s language, has claimed publicly that teachers are not being punished by being reassigned.



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