

Financial czar threatens to throw Detroit public schools into bankruptcy

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The drive to dismantle the public schools system in Detroit has reached a critical stage under the whip of emergency financial manager Robert Bobb, who declared on Monday that he is considering bankruptcy proceedings for the Detroit Public Schools (DPS). Such a course would result in the ripping up of union contracts, the loss of thousands of more jobs and the closing of more than half of the schools that remain open.

The move would also signal a green light to all the advocates of privatization and the spread of charter schools at the expense of public education.

Even if bankruptcy were not filed immediately, the alternate scenario Bobb has outlined is nearly as drastic, and would all but set the stage for bankruptcy. At a meeting Monday evening at Cass Technical High School, Bobb laid out an “alternative” plan consisting of the mass layoff of school employees resulting in larger class sizes, increasing the number of “public” charter schools and the privatization (outsourcing to the lowest bidder) of services such as transportation, security, maintenance and custodial services.

In a performance both cynical and demagogic, Bobb confessed, “I cannot balance the budget. I never thought I’d hear myself saying that.” Bobb decried the “sins of the fathers,” a reference to the corruption and mismanagement that has plagued the district in recent years. Missing from his explanation was any reference to the collapse of the auto industry and the decades-long deindustrialization of Detroit that have left it the poorest big city in America.

There are several parallels, however, between the Obama administration’s forced bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler, and Bobb’s “restructuring” plans for Detroit’s public schools. In both cases, Democratic Party politicians have sought to exploit the economic crisis to drastically downsize jobs and roll back the conditions of workers on behalf of powerful financial interests.

Since being appointed by Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm in March, Bobb has been given dictatorial powers, closing 29 schools, firing administrators and laying

off hundreds of teachers and support staff. He has also instituted the restructuring of a number of high schools as required by the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), passed by Congress in 2001.

These actions provoked student walkouts at three high schools in opposition to the firing of popular and competent administrators, and the protests of parents against the school closings. Bobb has ignored the public outcry and proceeded with his plans.

The cutbacks Bobb is now proposing go even further. At least 18 percent of the entire DPS workforce, some 2,451 employees, would lose their jobs, including an additional 1,000 teachers. The number of guidance counselors for students facing an array of social and economic challenges will be reduced from 203 to a mere 45.

These staff reductions, coupled with the closing of neighborhood schools, will inevitably further degrade the education environment, creating overcrowding in the classrooms, dislocating students to unfamiliar neighborhoods, and create even greater tensions. In addition, Bobb is threatening payless paydays and cuts in health benefits.

At the Cass Tech meeting, Mr. Bobb feigned expressions of anger and exasperation at the extent of the budget crisis. However, just one month ago, Bobb stated that he was considering the “automotive model” as his approach to dealing with school “reform.” What else could he have meant except the prospect of bankruptcy, as in the GM “model,” not as a “last resort,” as he still maintains, but as the primary option to break the resistance of teachers, other school employees and students? Now that most of the DPS staff, except those teaching summer school, are dispersed, he is revealing the full extent of the cutbacks that have long been finalized.

Bobb’s claim that he is working for the interests of the children is equally fraudulent. At Monday’s meeting he stated that eliminating the budget deficit in one year “would not be fair to the children.” However, with Bobb now demanding that the union accept larger class sizes at the high

schools, and with the present upper limit on class size being 35, how does raising this limit to 40 or 45 enhance the education of students? How is the virtual elimination of guidance counseling fair to the student? If schools are being penalized for failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), as mandated by NCLB, how can they possibly improve student achievement under these new and brutal conditions proposed by Bobb?

Meanwhile Keith Johnson, president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers Local 231, has been reduced to plaintive remarks about how the demands made by Bobb are “devastating” and how they will “impact the classroom,” while offering no resistance. How could he? Johnson has been a party to the deception that Bobb’s appointment by Governor Granholm, a Democrat, was really in the best interests of Detroit’s youth.

The DFT has played the role of junior adviser to Bobb, counseling him on where “waste can be trimmed.” In the weeks leading up to Bobb’s remarks on Monday, the DFT leadership refused to divulge what concessions demands Bobb was making. Johnson has frequently remarked that he did not want to negotiate the contract before the membership, so any notion that he did not know what historically won gains teachers would be expected to give up strains credibility.

Back on May 26, school employees were treated to a special “staff development” extravaganza at Cobo Hall, entitled, “Building Centers of Excellence in Every School for Every Child in Every Neighborhood.” This charade concocted by Bobb, with the complete support of the DFT and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, was designed to package NCLB-styled education “reform,” such as merit pay, in a palatable way.

The decision to hold such a gathering was decided upon at an extraordinary meeting between Bobb, Keith Johnson and American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingartner on May 6, at the AFT headquarters in Washington, DC. Johnson later commented, “The most important aspect of what took place today was the feeling of collegiality. All of us agree about the importance of working together, not only in reforming the district but transcending the district into one which we can be proud of.”

The idea that excellent schools can be created without a complete redirection of society’s wealth in the interests of the masses of working people is a cruel hoax. Equally fraudulent is the claim that there is no money for education. The Obama administration has given, with no questions asked, trillions of dollars to bail out the investment banks, and disreputable firms such as AIG. A small fraction of the American population is awash in wealth. There is no constituency within this parasitic social layer for the

maintenance of public education or, for that matter, the education of the vast majority of urban and working class children.

Moreover, both President Obama and his education secretary Arne Duncan have spoken favorably about charter schools, and are seamlessly carrying out the punitive aspects of the Bush administration’s education policy, as outlined in NCLB. Bobb is simply their point man in the destruction of public education in favor of a class-based system that provides the best instruction to the privileged while offering substandard conditions for the vast majority of working class children.

Genuine free and universal public education is bound up with overcoming the vast inequities in society as a whole and guaranteeing the economic and social well-being of the vast majority of people. The cause of the crisis besetting the Detroit Public Schools is not simply corruption or mismanagement, but the collapse of the capitalist system. Teachers must reject the argument that they have to “save” the Detroit Public Schools by giving up their right to economic security. The opposite is the truth. Only through insisting that there is adequate funding to guarantee secure jobs and decent living standards for all school employees will it be possible to attain the resources necessary to rebuild the public school system and provide high-quality education for all.

Teachers should not hand over another penny in concessions. All further school closings must be opposed and a fight launched to rescind all layoffs. New organizations of struggle must be forged by rank-and-file teachers, independent of the DFT, to unite all school employees in a common struggle with city workers, auto workers, and teachers from other districts, with the aim of launching a general strike movement to defend the working class.



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