

Detroit teachers rally against concessions and layoffs

Walter Gilberti
26 August 2009

Nearly 800 Detroit teachers and support staff picketed Detroit Public Schools (DPS) headquarters at the Fisher Building Tuesday morning. The protest, organized by the Detroit Federation of Teachers and the coalition of unions associated with DPS, was called to protest the layoffs of teachers and other schools employees and the concessions demanded by the district headed by financial czar Robert Bobb.

With less than a week remaining before school reopens on August 31, more than 6,000 teachers remain without a contract and are faced with proposals that, if accepted, would drastically reduce living standards and undermine working conditions in the classroom. Bobb waited until the last minute to present his demands, after engaging in months of perfunctory “negotiations,” during which 2,000 teachers and support staff were laid off, while many hundreds more were subjected to a degrading re-application procedure.

Bobb, with the complete backing of the Obama administration, is enforcing the punitive aspects of the No Child Left Behind Act, initiated by the Bush administration and passed overwhelmingly by Congress in 2001. Obama, along with Education Secretary Arne Duncan, have consistently advocated the spread of charter schools, and through their “Race to the Top” education scheme will force schools to compete for meager amounts of federal money.

In Detroit, 50 schools are being “reconstituted” after having been deemed “failed schools” for not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), as measured almost exclusively by improvements in standardized test scores. Hundreds of teachers affected by the restructuring, and not retained at their former schools, have been placed in a jobs pool and are still awaiting reassignment.

With an estimated 90,000 students scheduled to return to the classrooms on September 8, the unresolved staffing issues along with the overall lack of readiness of the physical conditions in the buildings themselves present a

recipe for chaos.

Bobb’s eleventh-hour concessions demands are designed to get the DFT to foist unacceptable conditions on its members or, if that fails, to provoke a strike that could result in state intervention to enforce Michigan’s reactionary anti-strike law that prohibits walkouts by state employees.

The concessions demands of DPS management are draconian and include over the course of a five-year contract an across-the-board 10 percent reduction in pay, coupled with the freezing of pay steps. Teachers would have to pay an additional 10 percent for health care, including dental and optical coverage. Teachers on medical leave would no longer be able to use their accumulated sick days to receive full pay, but would have to settle for workmen’s compensation that only pays 40 percent of a teacher’s salary.

Under the proposed contract, prospective retirees could no longer cash in their accumulated sick days, and pregnant women would lose the right to extended maternity leave. Teachers on military leave would not be guaranteed a job when they return. Finally, oversized class and lost prep compensation would be eliminated, as would the payment of longevity bonuses.

At the rally DFT officials said little about Robert Bobb’s concession demands. The union is seeking a continuation of the previous contract, an unlikely outcome, since Bobb hasn’t budged on anything since being appointed by Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm to overhaul the district’s finances back in March. Bobb has closed schools, laid off employees and fired popular and competent administrators despite protests from parents and students.

DFT President Keith Johnson has made a virtue of the fact that since negotiations began two months ago the union has made no demands. In fact, the DFT emblazoned this pathetic admission on placards it handed out to teachers at Tuesday’s rally. “We demanded nothing, and they said it was too much!” was one such slogan. The DFT’s parent

organization, the American Federation of Teachers, which had a significant presence at the rally, echoed the DFT's prostration, distributing buttons with the slogan "With Us—Not to Us," suggesting that the union was prepared to accept a rollback in teachers' conditions as long as it was done with the collusion of the DFT, not unilaterally.

The union leaders are in effect saying to the Robert Bobbs of the world, "Don't leave us out." They are telling Bobb that—just as in the UAW's collaboration with the Obama administration in facilitating the rather trouble-free bankruptcy processes for GM and Chrysler, by pushing through massive concessions from both working and retired auto workers behind the slogan "Save the auto industry"—the teachers unions have their role to play in smoothing the progress of education "reform."

Johnson made this explicitly clear in an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site* at Tuesday's rally. He defended Obama's reactionary education policy, saying the president "wants to see significant reforms and we are prepared to negotiate significant reform models."

Johnson added, "We cannot continue to deliver education in the same way and get the same results. The results are unsatisfactory. So we have to develop some innovative approaches and we are prepared to do that. But reform has to be done with us, not to us."

That these "unsatisfactory" results are not caused by teachers but the economic and social devastation wrought by 30 years of de-industrialization and the systematic starving of funds to public education by the Democrats and Republicans was never broached by Johnson. Instead he signaled the union's willingness to collaborate with the Democratic administration whose "educational reform" constitutes a fundamental attack on teachers and the right to public education.

Johnson—whose union has overseen the destruction of more than 5,000 teachers' jobs over the last decades—acknowledged that Bobb was seeking to "eradicate collective bargaining rights accumulated over the last 42 years—but explicitly rejected any joint strike action by teachers and city and state workers who are facing similar demands for wage and benefit cuts, along with mass layoffs.

Johnson's statements stood in sharp contrast to those of rank-and-file teachers who were angered by the right-wing character of Obama's education policy and expressed their determination to fight.

Kathy, a DPS teacher for 20 years, said, "Good teachers are being fired when their schools are 'reconstituted.' I know five teachers who are national award winners, each with 20 years experience, who lost their jobs when their schools closed. The closing of supposedly 'failing' schools was put in with Bush's No Child Left Behind program,

which was really "leave everybody behind."

"I was shocked by Obama's education policy. His educational secretary, Arne Duncan, is known really as a charter school king. He came to Detroit and said we had a 'disaster' here. But he would not address the three things that we need to get rid of this disaster: lower classroom sizes, materials and supplies, and the time teachers need for sufficient preparation.

"We've been subsidizing the school system out of our pockets for years. When the school I mentioned closed they told the teachers to take all of their stuff and leave behind the Board of Education's property. There was nothing left, because virtually all the supplies had been purchased by the teachers.

"My mom taught in the Detroit schools for 30 years. Together we have 50 years experience. She is angry because they are taking away everything that she marched for over the years. They had to fight at a time when there were 45 kids in a class and were told they had to work on their lunch hours. Things like 'duty-free' lunch hours were a big gain.

"I believe in quality education for all children. The charter schools are a like a return to a feudal system. Some schools will get all the resources and the others will be left to starve. 'I got mine' and the heck with the rest of the schools.

"I thought Obama would be different. I'm outraged that he has given all this money to Wall Street and nothing for the schools. They said because he was African-American he would be for ordinary people. But he is for the rich. I guess green covers black."

During the rally supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed a statement to teachers calling for a general strike to unite all workers against job cuts and concessions and for the development of a political movement of the working class to fight for a socialist alternative to the two parties of big business. (See "Unite all Detroit area workers to defend public education and defeat the attack on jobs and living standards!")

On Sunday teachers will assemble at the University of Detroit's Callahan Hall at 4:00 p.m. to discuss the next course of action. The SEP urges teachers to reject any attempt to force through a concessions contract and to begin a struggle to mobilize the entire Detroit-area working class in defense of public education and living standards.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact