

Detroit teachers' union blocks strike action against wage cuts, layoffs

DFT committed to implement Obama's school "reform"

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The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) on Wednesday agreed to extend its current contract until October 31, preempting a possible strike by 6,000 teachers as schools open September 8. The teachers, whose contract expired in late June, are opposing demands for sweeping wage and benefit concessions from a financial manager appointed by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm.

The DFT had called a mass membership meeting for Sunday afternoon where teachers were scheduled to vote on whether or not to strike. It is evident that the union leadership, which has publicly opposed strike action, was concerned they could lose control of the meeting and have a repeat of the experiences of 1999 and 2006, when teachers voted overwhelmingly to walk out.

The DFT also wanted to preempt any joint struggle by teachers and city workers who are facing similar wage cuts. Immediately after the contract extension was announced, Detroit Mayor David Bing said he would lay off 1,000 city workers beginning Monday if they did not accept a 10 percent wage cut and other concessions.

In a rally in front of the schools headquarters Tuesday, hundreds of teachers expressed their determination to stand up to Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb's demand for a 10 percent wage cut for five years, sharp increases in out-of-pocket health care expenses and other rollbacks in living standards and working conditions.

At a joint press conference the next night, however, DFT President Keith Johnson and Bobb pledged to work together. "I want everyone to know, parents in particular, that what we will be negotiating over the next 60 days is in fact a true reform agenda," Bobb said. This would include "school-based performance bonuses." Bobb added any settlement would have to add up to \$45 million in concessions from the union.

Standing next to Bobb, DFT President Johnson said, "Today is important. We demonstrated that we are both committed to acting in the best interests of children."

Since taking over the school district in March, Bobb has demonstrated nothing but contempt for Detroit children and teachers. He has ordered the shut down of 50 schools and has laid off 2,000 teachers and support staff. Close to 50 additional schools have been "reconstituted" under the guidelines of the No Child Left Behind Act, forcing more than 2,500 teachers, aides and counselors through the degrading process of reapplying for their jobs. In addition, Bobb has fired 33 principals, provoking a series of student walkouts across the city.

Bobb's agenda goes far beyond forcing the teachers to pay for the district's \$259 million deficit. He is the point man for the Obama administration, which is seeking to use Detroit as a test case to push

through its reactionary education agenda of merit pay, charter schools, standardized testing and vouchers across the country.

At Tuesday's rally, DFT officials said nothing to teachers about the impending deal with Bobb. Instead they claimed the decision to strike would be left up to the membership at Sunday's meeting.

At that rally, the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Johnson. His remarks underscored the chasm between the interests of ordinary teachers and the DFT apparatus.

Asked by this reporter what the teachers were confronting, Johnson said the latest offer from the school board was "punitive" and acknowledged that school officials "pretty much want to eradicate the collective bargaining rights that we have accumulated over the last 42 years."

Having acknowledged that Bobb was seeking to turn the clock back to the 1960s, however, Johnson said he did "not advocate for a strike." Instead he expressed a belief that a "fair and equitable settlement" could be reached.

Such an attitude cannot be explained by naiveté or simply self-delusion. Well aware that he was about to extend the contract with Bobb, Johnson went out of his way to downplay the character of Bobb's demands and made it clear the DFT was willing to negotiate unprecedented concessions.

After the WSWs pointed out that Bobb was working with Education Secretary Arne Duncan and the Obama administration to push through their school "reform" agenda the following exchange then took place:

WSWS: Obama has specifically said he would hold back economic stimulus money to school districts unless they opened the way for the expansion of charter schools.

Johnson: That's not what I heard him say. What I heard him say is that he wants to see significant reforms and we are prepared to negotiate significant reform models.

WSWS: What do you mean by "reforms"?

Johnson: 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 to delivering instruction, and we are prepared to do that. But reform has to be done with us, not to us.

Contrary to Johnson's claims, Obama has done little to conceal the content of his school "reforms." The president is asking Congress for a huge spending increase, from \$97 million to \$717 million next year, to push schools to adopt merit pay schemes, which tie teacher bonuses to student test scores. In addition, the White House is increasing federal funding to expand for-profit and semi-private charter schools, which strip teachers of basic protections and siphon students and funding from public schools.

Nor is there any doubt that the administration is blackmailing states and cities by threatening to withhold federal funding unless they open the door for the expansion of charter schools, merit pay and standardized testing to judge teacher performance.

Speaking at the Ninth Annual National Charters Schools Conference this week in Washington, DC, Duncan denounced the state of Rhode Island for reducing funding for charter schools, saying, “we don’t think that’s a smart thing for them to do, and we’re going to make that very, very clear.”

In June, Duncan told reporters, “States that don’t have charter school laws, or put artificial caps on the growth of charter schools, will jeopardize their application” for nearly \$5 billion in “Race to the Top” federal grant money, which is part of the economic stimulus package. “Simply put, they will put themselves at a competitive disadvantage for the largest pool of discretionary dollars states have ever had access to.”

To the WSWS Johnson expressed opposition to charter schools and merit pay. But these are at the very heart of the “reforms” Obama is pushing. Moreover, the DFT’s parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, has openly embraced charter schools and has sought to organize them in order to collect dues from the teachers who have no protections and sub-standard wages and benefits.

During a visit to Detroit in May, Duncan told the *Detroit News* editorial board that he had personally met with the DFT president and that “Everyone I met with, including Keith, understands the fundamental need for change. As the new contract is negotiated, there needs to be a very new thought process, radical change. I fully anticipate that the contract that emerges there will look fundamentally different than the one that’s in place today...”

Two weeks later, the DFT and AFT called a meeting in Detroit to prepare teachers to accept massive concessions. Union officials brought Bobb to the platform and preached the need to “work together.” AFT President Randi Weingarten 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.” (See “Unions and Detroit school board hold meeting to prepare for concessions”)

In his interview with the WSWS, Johnson went to great length to deny the fact that teachers are facing a *political struggle* against the Obama administration and its right-wing agenda.

“I am not concerned about President Obama and Arne Duncan,” Johnson told the WSWS, “I don’t negotiate with them. Right now I negotiate with Robert Bobb. He is the focus of my attention right now.”

There is a definite political reason why Johnson attempts to conceal the nature of the struggle teachers are facing. He opposes a fight against the Democrats because the DFT is politically aligned with Detroit Mayor Bing, Governor Granholm and Obama. It accepts entirely their claim that teachers and the working class as a whole must pay for the crisis of the capitalist system.

And what of the DFT’s record of past negotiating “successes”?

When this reporter pointed out that there have been years of concessions granted by the DFT, Johnson replied, “I would disagree with that. I have been negotiating contracts on the DFT bargaining committee since 1994. The only time that we had any concessions was in 2005 and we got most of that back in 2006, 07 and 08. So we don’t have a history of negotiating concessions.”

This is a fraud. The union has accepted the erosion of job protections, undermined the wages and benefits, particularly of younger teachers, and signed letters of agreement to collaborate in the punitive requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. This has paved the way for the massive destruction of jobs and school closings, and the current draconian concessions Bobb is demanding.

The following exchange then took place:

WSWS: *How many teachers have lost their jobs in that period?*

Johnson: *Well we’ve gone from having 190,000 students in 1999 to around 90,000 students now. So that represents a 100,000-student loss in population and our membership has gone down from 12,500 to 7,700. When you don’t have kids you don’t need as many employees.*

WSWS: *5,000 teachers have lost their jobs. The conditions in the schools have worsened, the classrooms are overcrowded, teachers don’t have materials and students are forced to walk out of their schools.*

Johnson justifies the gutting of teachers’ jobs with the same arguments of school officials. Like them, he never addresses the *cause* of the devastating decline in enrollment: the corporate plundering of the city, overseen by the Democratic Party over the last three decades, which eliminated hundreds of thousands of jobs, impoverished much of the population and starved the schools and other city services of financial resources.

Like the business and political establishment, the trade union executives insist that the working class has no choice but to pay for this crisis. There is not the slightest suggestion from Johnson that teachers and the working class should demand that billions of dollars be poured into public education, rather than used to bail out the Wall Street bankers and speculators that are responsible for the economic collapse.

Instead, having been thoroughly corrupted and integrated into the corporate and political establishment, the DFT officials echo the same bogus argument that the cause of the crisis is poorly trained teachers, the lack of “accountability” and “school choice.” Their answer is to introduce the same “market” principles into public education that have produced one of the most socially unequal societies in the world.

If teachers are to defend their past gains and defend public education they cannot do so inside of organizations that are tied hand and foot to the Democratic Party and the profit system. New organizations of struggle are needed, based on rank-and-file committees of teachers, students and parents to fight school closings, layoffs and other attacks.

Such a struggle must be guided by a new political strategy. The fact that Obama is accelerating and expanding the scope of the right-wing educational policies of his Republican predecessor demonstrates that the working class cannot affect any change in policy within the confines of a political system dominated by two corporate-backed parties.

A new mass political party of the working class must be built, the Socialist Equality Party, whose aim is a fundamental reorganization of economic and political life so that society’s resources can be directed to the material and cultural enrichment of the working people, not the personal accumulation of wealth.

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