

Bill Cosby endorses attack on public education in Detroit

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Comedian Bill Cosby visited Detroit last Tuesday to give his vocal support to Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb, who is working with the city and the Obama administration to place the burden of the school district budget deficit on the backs of workers and young people.

During a series of media events culminating in a meeting at Henry Ford High School Tuesday evening, Cosby went out of his way to blame parents, teachers and students for the crisis in the local school system where many students fail to complete high school and, of those who do, few are prepared for college.

When presented with some of the real conditions in the local schools, Cosby dismissed them with disdain. “What are you going to do about it?” he taunted his listeners repeatedly. Parents, he said, “Haven’t done much of anything. You have a child who has gone bad, do something for a change.”

Tuesday afternoon, when he was campaigning in the streets beside Mr. Bobb, a student confronted Cosby saying, “We have no music. We have no art.” The comedian shot back with a characteristic curt reply. “Get over it!” he said.

Cosby contrasted the poor performance of parents with the actions of Bobb. He called Bobb a “gunfighter,” hired by the governor to “clean out this town.” According to Cosby, Detroit parents had not done anything for their children, or for the schools. Martial violence in the form of the executive power of Robert Bobb would show them how to behave.

The city administration of Mayor Dave Bing, the president of the local teachers’ union Keith Johnson and the mass media, all joined with the schools’ financial controller Robert Bobb in welcoming Cosby’s message because it obscures the responsibility of the Democratic Party for the destruction of the schools.

Fifty schools will close this year, and 2,000 teachers and staff have already been laid off. Mr. Bobb is demanding pay and benefit cuts from teachers and staff and the elimination of programs such as, music, gym and art, where they still exist. Working closely with the Obama administration, Bobb

is using the layoffs and pay cuts as a club to force through merit pay based on test scores and the replacement of public education with charter schools, which are operated by private companies for profit.

Cosby made no mention of the local rate of unemployment, which stands at close to 30 percent, the highest in the United States. Nor did he refer to the conditions of widespread poverty that impact every aspect of life in the working class. The wealthy entertainer expressed no empathy for the many children who come to school without breakfast, or for the majority of students who struggle to learn without access to textbooks they can take home, or for the hundreds of teachers who use their own money to buy basic supplies so that their students have materials to work with.

The bankruptcy of GM and Chrysler were engineered by the Obama administration to free the corporations from obligations to the working class. The concentrated attack against public education in Detroit, which is now in full swing, extends the logic of Obama’s pressure on the auto workers onto their children and the schools they attend. It is a case of exploiting a real crisis of decay and corruption for the purpose of protecting the wealth of the ruling elite through intensified assaults on the working class.

The attempt to blame parents for the problems confronting black youth has become a theme for Cosby. In a speech on the 50th anniversary of *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 2004, Cosby declared: “People marched and were hit in the face with rocks to get an education, and now you have these knuckleheads walking around. ... The lower economic people are not holding up their end of the deal. These people are not parenting.” (See, “Bill Cosby blames parents for US society’s ills”).

These same themes have more recently been taken up by Obama, who in a speech before the NAACP earlier this year declared that social ills as mass unemployment and poverty could not be used as “excuses,” insisting that the problems confronting the black population were primarily cultural in character. (See, “Obama’s speech to the NAACP”).

Cosby grew up in Philadelphia and began his meteoric career as a stand-up comic, poking fun at working class youth, who, at the time, were not that different from himself. His years of success and privilege have taken their toll. What once had the tone of a jest between equals has become tainted by shades of conceit and more and more takes on the character of jibes of contempt, directed at the “unclean mass” on the other side of the tracks. Today he expresses, more than he may himself realize, not the hope and aspirations of the oppressed youth he grew up with, but, on the contrary, the ideas and attitudes of the ruling elite.

Outside the hall at Henry Ford High School, where the meeting was staged Tuesday evening, students from this year’s senior class complained bitterly about the abrupt termination of an esteemed counselor who had worked with their class through three years of high school, only to be let go at the beginning of their final year. They had circulated petitions calling for her reinstatement, but to no avail.

Other students reported that the school’s award-winning band and chorus had been terminated at the end of last year for lack of funds.

“I am very disgusted by it,” commented Kimberly Bishop, the mother of four recent graduates. “We had a great band. They won competitions, and they were moving right along. But there was not enough money to keep the teachers here. They were doing very well. But you are talking about money. Where is that \$46 million that came up missing? Why are there all those administrators getting six figures?”

Her daughter, Darmisha graduated last year. “At one point I was in band, at another, I was in choir,” she said. “I was very involved in music. It was cut directly after I left. There were a lot of students that participated in band and vocals; and since it’s been cut out, they don’t have anything else to do.”

The destruction of this award-winning program that enjoyed support in the whole community gives the lie to the administration’s argument that the cuts are aimed at schools that fail to improve performance. The argument itself is bankrupt. The real cause of the crisis is the economic decay in which the students live. The schools need money and programs, teachers, counselors and extra programs, not less of everything.

A number of teachers and parents walked out of Tuesday’s meeting with Cosby in disgust.

“He has no business speaking that way,” responded Mrs. Bishop to the comedian’s assertion that the parents had done nothing. “I was here every day. Four of my children graduated here, and not one of them had books to bring home.”

One of her sons enlisted and went to Iraq so that he would have the money to attend college. “I was on pins and needles

the whole time he was gone,” she continued. “When he got back, he tried to go to Wayne State. It broke my heart. ‘Mom,’ he told me. ‘I just can’t do it. I’m not prepared.’”

Mrs. Bishop placed responsibility on the administration and its destruction of the school’s curriculum. “There are not enough things to keep the students interested,” she said. “There is no music. There is no journalism. There is no debate. There is one art class for 1,300 kids. There are just not enough extra curricular activities. They have gym, but it is not like a real gym class. Kids just play basketball all the time. And the girls really don’t have anything. They just sit there and watch the boys play.”

“There is not enough going on in the school to keep the kids motivated. That is what really disgusts me about it. They want to come here to get an education. But they also want to learn how to cook. They want to learn how to write. They want to learn how to play music.”

“We need those kind of things put in all of our schools—computers for every child that attends Detroit Public Schools. They need to put that stimulus money in our schools in front of our kids. But whatever they get will probably not be used for the kids. Our children are the ones who are being directly affected by these cuts.”

The active participation of Keith Johnson, President of Detroit Federation of Teachers Local 231, who appeared on stage with Cosby and Bobb and danced to the music of a student singing group, was particularly significant. Johnson has once again solidarized himself with Bobb and the attack on public education in Detroit. The DFT recently pushed through a 60-day contract extension for teachers, preventing a strike while tying the hands of teachers and isolating them from city workers facing a similar attack on jobs and living conditions.

The DFT is working closely with Bobb to push through unprecedented concessions, along with the whole right-wing “reform” agenda of the Obama administration.



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