

# Detroit teachers' union agrees to work with Democrats to cut jobs, wages

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During a mass meeting of public school teachers in Detroit Sunday, officials from the Detroit Federation of Teachers outlined a policy of surrender. Union officials expressed their willingness to work with Robert Bobb, the emergency financial manager appointed by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm to impose unprecedented job cuts and concessions on teachers.

The meeting, attended by more than a thousand teachers, followed the decision by the DFT to extend its contract until October 31, heading off any strike action against sweeping wage and benefit cuts. Bobb is also demanding a series of “school reforms” at the behest of the Obama administration, which is seeking to use Detroit as a test case for its national policies of merit pay, standardized testing and expansion of charter schools.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed a statement urging teachers to unite with city workers and other workers to oppose all layoffs and wage cuts. Such a struggle, the SEP statement said, would require a break with the DFT and a political fight against the Obama administration and the Democrats who run Detroit.

There was widespread disquiet among teachers as DFT President Keith Johnson argued that strike action and any resistance was impossible and made the preposterous claim that his commitment to “work together” with Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb would result in a “fair and equitable” contract offer in two months’ time.

Johnson also held the threat of economic ruin over the heads of teachers saying that he would not order them to “withhold your ability to provide for your families” by going on strike. He asked teachers, “how many of you because of the economic times we are in are either the primary or sole breadwinner in your household?”

Finally, the union passed out an information sheet on Michigan’s reactionary law prohibiting public employee strikes, which outlined the massive fines, legal sanctions and threat of termination that teachers could face if they walked out. “I want everyone to be aware and share this with your colleagues because everyone should be aware of the reprisals” for a work stoppage, he warned.

Given the threat of fines and the disastrous economic situation in Detroit, which leads the nation with a 29 percent jobless rate, teachers did not feel confident in rejecting the contract extension and going out on strike. This was also a vote of no confidence in the DFT, which has a long record of betrayed struggles, including strikes in 2006 and 1999, when teachers rebelled against former

DFT leader John Elliott’s effort to extend the contract and walked out in defiance of the union.

Johnson—who was elected president in January 2009 after serving under Elliott and others on the bargaining committee since 1994—made it clear that since taking office he had made a commitment to school and city officials to “make sure that schools started on time.”

He acknowledged that the district was seeking to eliminate the gains won by teachers over four decades of struggle. Bobb, he said, had submitted a list of “91 insidious” proposals, including demands for a 10 percent pay cut that would last for five years, a freeze in step increases, sharp increases in out-of-pocket expenses for health benefits, the elimination of year-long maternity leave and stripping elementary teachers of their daily preparation time. “In essence,” he said, “those that have a job—all you will have left is the right to do it.”

Johnson suggested that Bobb had agreed to take the demands off the table in exchange for the contract extension. This is a fraud. At a joint press conference with Johnson last week announcing the contract extension, Bobb said any agreement would have to fulfill his demands for \$45 million in concessions from the union.

In fact, the letter of agreement signed by the union to extend the contract explicitly commits the union to negotiate a new five-year agreement focused on achieving “\$45 million in Cost Savings” to be achieved through “Restructuring Health Care Benefits and Coverage,” reductions in “Teacher compensation,” and “closing and merging of programs and buildings.” Also included is a series of “instructional reforms,” including “School-Based Performance Bonuses,” i.e., merit pay.

Johnson claimed that the upcoming calculation of state aid based on student enrollment levels might lead Bobb to reduce the amount of his concessions demands. “If all you need is \$15 million,” Johnson declared, “then that’s all you are going to get.” At the same time, the DFT president made it clear the union would go along with even larger concessions, including demands for more layoffs than the 2,000 jobs currently being cut, if the cost-savings were put “towards increasing teacher salaries.”

When it came to Bobb’s demands for “reforms,” Johnson repeated that the DFT “embraced reforms,” but it wanted them to be imposed, “with us, not to us.”

Johnson admitted that he had approached school officials with a proposal for a year-long contract extension so they could impose their agenda of school reform without the danger of provoking a

strike over those issues. This included the practice, begun under Bush's No Child Left Behind measures, of "reconstituting" so-called failed schools and forcing teachers to reapply for their jobs, with principals empowered to reject older, high-paid teachers or simply blacklist outspoken instructors.

Johnson said he told school officials, "Let's get the restructuring out of the way, let's get the reconstitution out of the way and the displacement out of the way; let's work on the reform models but let's do all the things separate and apart from the negotiations, then when all of them are done, then we can sit down and have some serious negotiations."

In listing the series of reasons why he claimed no struggle was possible, Johnson acknowledged the basic antagonism between the union apparatus and rank-and-file teachers. One thing, former DFT president Elliott had taught him, Johnson said, was "When it comes to taking your membership out [on strike] the first thing you have to consider is: if you take them out, how are you going to get them back. Because taking them out is the easy part. All I have to do is stand up here and say 'hell no, we won't go.' But how would I get you back?"

Johnson's repeated insistence that struggle was hopeless and his suggestion that Bobb would retreat on his demands was not a matter of just personal cowardice or self-delusion. The DFT functions as a political tool of the Democratic Party in imposing its demands on teachers and blocking any unified struggle with other sections of the working class. This includes city workers, who are facing similar demands by Mayor David Bing for wage cuts and mass layoffs.

In comments from the floor several teachers expressed suspicion or outright opposition to the maneuvers of the DFT leaders. One high school teacher summarized the issues facing teachers, saying, "I reject entirely these arguments. Johnson says we might not get what we want—well the union has not been demanding anything. Their operating slogan has been 'We demanded nothing and they said it was too much.'"

"We have to understand who we are fighting," he continued, "This is a letter of understanding between the DFT leadership and Robert Bobb. We have no understanding with Bobb. He is a government operative who has been employed to destroy public education and drive down the conditions of teachers. He does not represent the interests of teachers, students or parents in Detroit. And behind Robert Bobb is Arne Duncan, Obama's education secretary. You will remember that Arne Duncan came to Detroit and said it was ground zero for education 'reform.' These are the right-wing nostrums that have percolated for years by the opponents of education."

When the teacher attempted to read a resolution for a vote, Johnson ruled him out of order. Nevertheless the teacher outlined the resolution issued in the name of the Rank and File Coordinating Committee, which had been passed out before the meeting. It called for a rejection of the letter of understanding and all concession demands and layoffs, and called for the rehiring of all laid off teachers. It further called for mass resistance in defense of public education, including strike action organized by rank-and-file committees independent of the DFT, which appealed to auto workers, city workers and every section of the working class.

Finally, it called for real education reforms—not the agenda of merit pay and charter schools. This would mean the repeal of No Child Left Behind and the redirection of billions towards rebuilding and retooling the schools, instead of bailing out the banks and funding wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The teacher concluded, "Since when is struggle not allowed in the working class. How have we won anything without struggle?"

Other teachers also expressed opposition. One teacher asked, "Are we going to be right back in the same place in 60 days from now [after the two-month extension of the contract]?"

Another teacher pointed out that calling off a strike on the eve of the student enrollment count that was used to determine state funding to the schools would remove all leverage from the teachers and hand the initiative to Robert Bobb. She added, "talking about 'accountability,' why are there so many members of the union's negotiating committee and how much are they paid?"

During the meeting, DFT officials relied on long-time union dissident Steve Conn and his Equal Opportunity Now caucus to bolster the authority of the union and block opposition from rank-and-file teachers. Conn took the microphone saying, "I rise in support of the 60-day extension" to the surprise of many teachers. He urged the DFT to "start acting like a union" and publicly oppose charter schools and the privatization of public education.

Conn has long insisted that no struggle is legitimate unless it has the stamp of approval of the union apparatus, and that teachers should focus all their efforts on reforming the union even as it openly collaborates with the Democrats to attack them. At the same time, Conn and other ex-lefts who have trade union positions in Detroit expressly oppose a *political struggle* by the working class and bolster illusions in the Obama administration.

In his opening remarks, Johnson noted Conn's role as a "left" advisor—not a political opponent—of the DFT, saying, "People may think we don't like each other—but actually we do. And I'm talking about brother Steve Conn. Brother Conn has been asking me for a month, 'Doggone it, Keith we need to have a rally. We need to go up there and tell them what we are not going to stand for.' I said, 'Steve, I'm waiting on them to give us something to rally about.' Well brothers and sisters on August 18 they gave it to us and on the 25<sup>th</sup> we rallied."

Conn got his rally and in return pledged his support for the contract extension. The day after the rally, Johnson appeared in a joint press conference with Bobb, announcing the extension and his willingness to collaborate with the governor-appointed hatchet man to attack teachers and help dismantle public education.



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