Detroit teachers denounce sellout deal at mass meeting

Jerry White
8 December 2009

Detroit public school teachers expressed overwhelming opposition to a contract negotiated between a state-appointed financial director and the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) at a mass meeting Sunday afternoon.

The three-year deal—which freezes wages for the first two years, reduces class preparation time and slashes medical benefits—also includes the demand that the city's 7,000 teachers accept a pay cut of $10,000 over two years—or $250 out of every biweekly paycheck. DFT officials presented the latter as an interest-free "investment" in the cash-strapped school district, which would be reimbursed upon retirement or layoff.

Teachers repeatedly shouted down DFT President Keith Johnson and other officials as they described the agreement, with some demanding to know whether DFT executives, like Johnson—who reportedly makes $148,000—were taking pay cuts too. Many came with handwritten signs calling for a "no" vote, denounced the pay deduction ("DFT is not a bank") and asserting that teachers were not responsible for the $219 million deficit ("We did not cause the problem").

The agreement, which will impose more than $63 million in givebacks, was reached after months of behind-the-scenes negotiations between the DFT, its parent organization the American Federation of Teachers, and Robert Bobb, the so-called "Emergency Financial Manager" appointed by Michigan's Democratic governor, Jennifer Granholm.

Behind Bobb and Granholm stands the Obama administration, which is seeking to use Detroit as a test case for a national push to implement its retrograde program of merit pay and charter schools, which will further undermine the principle of equal access to education. Bobb's demands, which have been endorsed by Obama's Education Secretary Arne Duncan, include "Priority Schools," "School-based Performance Bonus Committees" and schemes to fire experienced teachers through the shutdown of so-called "failing" schools.

The meeting illustrated the real class relations in Detroit. On the one side were the teachers demanding decent living standards and proper funding to provide all school children with a quality education. (See, "Teachers speak to WSWS on concessions contract ") On the other was the DFT, representing the political and economic forces in the city and the state, which have carried out a decades-long attack on public education and the working class.

Johnson repeated the argument that there was no money to meet teachers' demands. If the DFT hadn't accepted a 15-minute reduction in class preparation time, he said, it would have had to find another $11 million in savings by imposing other concessions.

Bobb—who has closed 29 schools and carried out 2,500 layoffs since March—was paid $260,000, and has just signed a one-year extension for an undisclosed amount. According to local news reports, Bobb—who has presented himself as an anti-corruption crusader—has signed off on more than $40 million to hire "school turnaround" consultants, including some who worked with him in Washington, DC and Cleveland. The bankrupt school district has paid for leased riverfront apartments, $400 a week per person for food and airfare to fly out of town for weekends, according to invoices and school officials.

After several teachers denounced the sellout and pledged to vote the contract down, Johnson warned that a rejection of the deal would lead Bobb to declare the school district insolvent. "If the district declares bankruptcy, seniority is gone, longevity is gone, step increments are gone, oversize class payments are gone, your pay is going to be drastically reduced in

© World Socialist Web Site

perpetuity. And last but not least," Johnson threatened, "more than 1,500 of our members will lose their jobs."

Among those who spoke from the floor was a high school teacher and supporter of the Socialist Equality Party. He denounced the contract, and explained that the DFT did not represent teachers but the same forces, including the Obama administration, that were determined to make the working class pay for the crisis of the capitalist system. He said it was a lie that there was no money for decent wages and public schools, pointing to the fact that the top 23 Wall Street firms were handing out bonuses worth $140 billion this month.

The teacher urged other teachers to organize a rank-and-file committee independent of the DFT. The committee, he said, should make a direct appeal to parents, students and the working class throughout Detroit and Michigan to wage a common struggle in defense of jobs, living standards and basic necessities such as public education.

The SEP supporter's statement contrasted sharply with comments from a leading "opposition" figure in the DFT, Steve Conn. Conn called for a "No" vote, but promoted the illusion that the DFT leadership would come back with a better deal if the contract was rejected. In fact, the DFT is no less committed than Robert Bobb in seeing the concessions pushed through.

Johnson explicitly opposed any fight by teachers to demand adequate funding for public education, and insisted that he was restricted by the financial condition of the school district, and therefore teachers had to accept Bobb's demands. "I understand nobody ever likes to have to give up something, but, ladies and gentlemen, here is the reality of our existence," he said. Another DFT speaker suggested that 800 teachers should retire and leave before their benefits were cut.

Last August, Johnson extended the contract in order to prevent a strike by teachers, which would have garnered widespread support, particularly from city workers who are facing similar wage and benefit cutting demands from Detroit Mayor David Bing.

Despite repeated demands for an immediate vote on the contract at the meeting, Johnson violated the long-standing tradition of a voice vote, instead saying that teachers would vote by secret ballot in their schools over the next two weeks.

Johnson denounced any suggestion of a job action by teachers. Talking about rumors of a possible protest on Monday, he said, "I am going to recommend to this membership that you do not attempt to punish the children of Detroit because you are not satisfied with this benefits agreement."

This provoked outrage from teachers speaking from the floor who said it was Bobb and the school board who were punishing young people, with their layoffs and budget-cutting, not teachers, who were fighting to defend decent education.

Before and after the meeting supporters of the SEP distributed a statement urging teachers to reject the DFT sellout and organize independent committees to unite Michigan teachers, parents and students to defend public education. After the membership meeting the SEP held a public meeting nearby to discuss the political issues in the teachers struggle and a socialist perspective to defend and greatly improve public education.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site