

Teachers speak to WSWs on concessions contract

A WSWs reporting team
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The WSWs spoke with teachers at Cobo Hall in Detroit, Michigan before and after a mass meeting on December 6. The teachers overwhelmingly opposed a concessions contract negotiated by the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and the Detroit Public Schools. (See, “Detroit teachers denounce sellout at mass meeting”)

Marion, a pre-school and special education teacher, told the WSWs, “We cannot afford these terms. Teaching is an occupation with a lot of women. Many of us are sole providers and female heads of households, with husbands laid off and children to take care of. My girlfriend has a daughter starting college in January. Her husband was laid off from Chrysler. They will have no way of paying for school under this plan.

“I cannot afford the \$500 taken out of my pay per month. The fact is that that money is not ever coming back after they take it away from us.

“I believe they’re trying to close Detroit public schools and get charter schools in here on the public funds, privatizing as much as possible.”

Another teacher said, “Our union president didn’t do a good job negotiating. We believed in him, and while we knew all these months that there would be some concessions, we thought they would bring us something we could at least live on.

“They are trying to force out the older teachers, who they are always claiming are ‘incompetent.’ When there are budget problems they always take it out of the teachers and the schools,” she said. “The contract is awful. Entry-level teachers are going to have their pay cut by 25 percent. The younger people are going to leave, and older teachers will leave.”

“A lot of us are barely getting by from paycheck to paycheck,” another teacher told the WSWs. “It’s winter, the holiday season, everybody’s broke, and

now they try to ram through this \$250 off every paycheck?”

“We can’t even pay for our day-to-day family expenses, and more and more we’re expected to pay for the school supplies for the children.”

Another teacher added, “The administrators just got a raise. They turn around and tell us ‘there’s no money.’ There’s all kinds of wasted spending. How about using all our buildings for schools, instead of letting them sit empty or leasing them out to private companies? How about making the overpaid people at the top take a pay cut?”

“First of all, we need to get rid of those consultants,” Marianne, a teacher with 26 years, told the WSWs. “[Emergency Financial Manager] Robert Bobb has brought in all these people to stay in the finest waterfront hotels, at our expense, to tell us we’re making too much money. I say get rid of them all. We could solve our problems better without them.

“Teachers have had it worse and worse over the years and the schools are neglected and the city is losing jobs. We have to pay for a lot of things ourselves that used to be part of the school budget. I bring supplies in to the school. I buy the hand sanitizer and bring garbage bags from home. They’re not cleaning the schools anymore; my husband comes in and sweeps my classroom every week. We used to have seven custodians at my school but after cuts in the summer, we only have two.

“They come up with all these cuts to wages, staffing levels, budgets, and they say ‘this is about the children.’ It is not about the kids, and it never has been,” Marianne said. “The schools are in terrible shape and overcrowded. There are times when I’m just a holding cell for the kids—how can we teach when the kids are hungry, have no supplies? And then the administrators blame us when the test scores are low.

“This is a secret ballot. I’m afraid they’re going to rig the vote. I can’t afford a \$500 a month cut to my salary. That’s like rent. How are we supposed to pay for our housing and food and heat without that money?” She added, “But I’m not Bank of America. You can’t loan me \$29 billion.”

Another teacher said, “When [DFT President] Keith Johnson tells us we should listen to the judge, that they will not declare bankruptcy and take our money [the \$250 deduction per pay check], I say, ‘Oh yeah? Look at what happened to the GM workers,’” who took concessions and the company went bankrupt anyway.

Joan, a teacher with 22 years at Nolan Elementary, said, “Based on what I have heard I am not happy. They want a \$250 deduction from your pay, no pay raise for two years and an option after three years.

“Teachers are being blamed for everything that goes wrong. They are treated any kind of way, and the union doesn’t back them up.

“Our school has no gym, no art, no music, no nothing? How are children supposed to be motivated?”

Gloria said, “I am supposed to instill values and morals in students. This is an awesome task we have. I resent the fact that they are doing this to me.

“I am doing the best I can with what I have. I teach learning disabled students. There are tiles missing on the roof, rain comes into my classroom. I would like Robert Bobb to come and see the conditions.

“I love my children, but I am not going to take this. They are not going to break my spirit.”

A teacher with 30 years told the WSWS, “I had to have a \$500 moving van to move supplies to my new school because they didn’t have any supplies there. Why should I have to spend my hard earned money so children can have the comfort they deserve? At my new school I had to pay \$100 cash for a uniform. Why do I need a uniform?”

Another teacher complained that the federal stimulus money was not being used to prevent layoffs and support teachers but to promote for profit education and charter schools. “These charters can select who they want to take. That’s not public education. We need to educate everybody.”

Kimberly, a high school teacher, said, “I am voting ‘No’ because this is a serious reversal of the gains we have won. It is clear that the students are not the priority of this administration. I am particularly

opposed to the idea of ‘priority students’ in certain schools receiving funding. I believe all children are priorities. Rather than making funding available for some it should be made available for all.

“The classes are filled to capacity. I teach in a high school with 35 kids in my class. I would love to have smaller class sizes. But, I am maxed out. I’m maxed out of paper work I have to do for my class, for resources I need for my classes—it really is just too much. And in the foreign language classes they have 40 students in a class. Can you imagine that?”

“I’m also opposed to the Termination Incentive Plan (TIP), where you loan the board money that they are supposed to pay you back with when you retire. What guarantee is there they will pay it back?”



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