

Concessions contract ratified by Detroit teachers after campaign of intimidation

Walter Gilberti, Joe Kishore
21 December 2009

Detroit teachers have ratified a concessions contract, following a campaign of intimidation and threats waged by the school district, the corporate media and the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) union.

According to the DFT, the final vote was 3,578 to 2,031. However, there are charges of irregularities involving the distribution of ballots and the determination of eligibility for voting. At the insistence of DFT President Keith Johnson, the ballot included language threatening a massive pay cut and bankruptcy proceedings if the agreement was rejected.

The contract is not only an attack on teachers; it is part of an attack on the public education system as a whole being spearheaded by the Obama administration.

Among the concessions included in the deal is a so-called “Termination Incentive Plan”—a supposed loan to the district that is, in reality, a substantial pay cut for full time teachers of up to \$10,000 over two years (at a rate of \$500 a month). The DFT claims the money will be returned when teachers retire or are laid off. The real aim of this measure, which was proposed by the DFT, however, is to compel older, more experienced teachers to leave the profession, thereby eliminating jobs and allowing the district to hire new teachers with no rights and lower pay.

In addition, teachers face cuts in health benefits, a pay freeze and the imposition of “reforms”, like “peer review” and merit pay, consistent with the punitive consequences as outlined in the No Child Left Behind Act.

The contract also paves the way for the expansion of charter schools, or so-called “priority schools.” The Michigan state legislature in Lansing just passed a bill that will expand charter schools throughout the state. This initiative is being pushed by the Obama administration and his misnamed “Race to the Top”

program, which ties meager federal funding to the expansion of charter schools.

There is overwhelming opposition to these measures among teachers. However, many saw no alternative to accepting the deal, with both the DFT and Bobb threatening mass layoffs and wage cuts if it was rejected. Indeed, from the beginning the DFT has actively conspired against the teachers it supposedly represents, working closely with the school district’s “emergency financial manager” Robert Bobb and Obama’s education secretary Arne Duncan.

In August, the union announced that it was extending the contract through October, claiming that this step was necessary to allow it to continue negotiations with Bobb. This preempted a possible strike at the beginning of the school year, blocked any possibility of a unified struggle with city workers facing similar wage-cutting demands and gave the district additional time to plan its attack.

After several more contract extensions, the district and the union announced the agreement in early December, prompting enormous and vocal opposition from teachers. At a mass meeting on December 6, Johnson and the DFT leadership were heckled and shouted down. Johnson libeled teachers for supposedly endangering the interests of the children, while insisting that the union would not come back with a better deal if it was rejected.

Then, at a raucous union meeting on December 10, Johnson called the Detroit police to threaten the arrest of those opposed to the contract.

The American Federation of Teachers, the parent union of the DFT, also played a key role, seeing the Detroit pact as a precedent for collaborating with the Obama administration to impose similar contracts nationally. On December 17, AFT President Randi

Weingarten hailed the agreement in a full-page ad in the *New York Times*, it proved the union's contention that it was better to impose "school reform"—merit, pay, charter schools and punitive teacher "accountability" schemes—with the help of the unions, not against them.

Meanwhile, Bobb and the corporate media, including the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News* launched a campaign to blackguard teachers opposed to the contract as indifferent to the fate of students. Test scores showing that Detroit finished last among major cities in education metrics—due to decades of underfunding and a social crisis in Detroit that includes 50 percent unemployment—were cited as a rationale for escalating the attack on public education.

The role of the "dissident" factions within the union also served to derail opposition. Leaders of a "Vote No" committee argued that all teachers had to do was vote the contract down and the district would be forced to come up with a better offer. They also promoted the false claim that the Obama administration would quickly make federal funds available if teachers showed some resistance—even though the administration is in fact determined to use Detroit as a model for similar measures across the country.

Under these conditions, it is not surprising that the contract was pushed through. It was passed not because of an unwillingness of teachers to fight. Rather, most teachers recognized if they were to defy the school district's threats and strike they would get no support from the DFT.

Johnson praised the vote, saying that it passed despite the "lies and rhetoric" of opponents. He is facing a drive by the "Vote No" committee to recall him as president of the union, which has so far gathered 800 of the 1,000 signatures required to hold a ballot.

The dissidents, however, offer no alternative. They deliberately conceal the political character of the struggle teachers face against the Obama administration and promote the illusion that the DFT and AFT—which have collaborated with the Democrats and Republicans against the interests of teachers for thirty years—can be pressured into fighting.

Bobb and the city government claim the ratification of the contract is proof of the support for his educational "reform" measures. In a statement released on Friday, Bobb said, "We are on the same page," and added, "We can now move forward, together, to

implement in Detroit the educational reforms that have been beneficial elsewhere in ensuring student success. It's the kids in Detroit that we are fighting for."

Detroit Mayor David Bing held up the vote as a model for other sections of the working class. "I hope the city's unions will also be so moved to follow suit and consider the future of our city," alluding to his demand that public workers accept a 10 percent pay cut and other concessions.

Teachers must draw the lessons of the bitter outcome. If nothing else, the vote serves as an object lesson in the futility of defending public education as well as the economic security of teachers through the DFT and the AFT, and through the trade union apparatus as a whole.

The treachery of these organizations and their open hostility to the interests of the workers they claim to represent is inextricably bound up with their support for the Democratic Party and their determination to subordinate teachers to the capitalist two-party system.

Following the bailout of the banks, the Obama administration is now overseeing the dismantling of public education. School districts throughout the country are responding to budget crises through layoffs, the closing down of schools, the elimination of programs, and other crippling cuts.

The defense of public education requires the construction of a new political party of the working class. The democratic and egalitarian principles, which the right to free, high quality public education is based on, is incompatible with the capitalist profit system, the staggering levels of social inequality and the policies of mass unemployment and war emanating from the Obama administration. The road forward for teachers involves the building of independent organizations dedicated to the socialist transformation of society.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact