

The way forward for Detroit teachers

Socialist Equality Party
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The mass opposition of teachers to the concessions contract signed by the Detroit Federation of Teachers and the Detroit Public Schools deserves the full support of the entire working class.

By rejecting the economic blackmail of city and state authorities, and fighting to defend their living standards and the right of their students to a quality education, the teachers are taking a stand for all working people.

The SEP calls for a “No” vote on the contract. The overturning of the sellout agreement must become the starting point for a broad movement of the working class throughout Detroit and Michigan in defense of public education, on the basis of a new political strategy. Only in this way can the determined onslaught by the corporate and financial elite be resisted.

The concessions demanded by the city are intolerable, including a pay freeze, millions of dollars in cuts in health care, reduced prep time, the introduction of merit pay and the expansion of charter schools, and a \$500 a month deduction from pay checks, insultingly packaged as an “investment” on the part of teachers.

The relationship of forces in the contract dispute was on display at the mass meeting on Sunday. On the one side were the teachers, who refuse to be scapegoats for a crisis not of their making.

On the other side were the DFT executives. In language indistinguishable from that of emergency financial manager Robert Bobb, DFT President Keith Johnson combined threats and lies to try to steamroll the contract through. He warned that if the contract were voted down, the union would not come back with anything better. Instead, teachers faced the prospect of a declaration of bankruptcy, mass layoffs and a permanent reduction in wages and benefits.

With utter disdain for teachers, Johnson insisted that they “not punish the children of Detroit because you are not satisfied with this benefits agreement” by rejecting the contract.

What a contemptible liar! As a result of decades of budget cuts, teachers are forced to deal with decaying buildings, the lack of adequate supplies, and large class sizes, not to

mention children coming to school hungry because their parents are out of work. These conditions have only gotten worse over the past year, with many teachers forced to use their own resources to provide the most basic necessities for their children.

Now, the forces for whom Johnson and the DFT speak—including the government in Detroit and Lansing, and the Obama administration—are engaged in a massive attack on the entire public education system, which is having a devastating impact on the children of Detroit, Michigan, and the entire country.

Without a peep of protest from the DFT, Bobb and the DPS have already shut down dozens of schools in Detroit. Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm, who appointed Bobb, has passed through cuts in per-pupil funding of between \$300 and \$600 throughout Michigan, which will lead to the elimination of programs, classes, and bus routes, along with the closure of schools and teacher layoffs.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration is tying meager federal money for public education—a paltry \$4 billion nationwide—to the expansion of charter schools and the implementation of merit pay, “market” reforms and testing schemes similar to those included in the new contract for Detroit teachers. These measures are aimed at destroying public education and creating a class-based education system that will provide good schools for a few and relegate the majority of working class and poor children to the most impoverished schools.

Under conditions in which American capitalism has no future for tens of millions of working class youth, except permanent unemployment, the ruling elite and its political representatives are repudiating the principle that every child, no matter what his or her background, should have access to at least a basic education.

For a socialist policy to defend education!

The egalitarian principles that underlie public education

are incompatible with the extreme levels of social inequality that characterize American society today. Therefore the fight to defend the right to universal access to high-quality education is inextricably tied to a broader struggle for social equality and the reorganization of society in the interests of the working class. The alternative to capitalism is socialism, i.e., a society democratically controlled by the working class, based on production for social need, not private profit.

On Sunday, when teachers denounced specific concessions in the contract, Johnson's response was to insist that if cuts were eliminated in one area, they would have to be found somewhere else. The DFT echoes the lie that there is "no money" to provide teachers with a living wage and properly fund education.

This claim, promoted by the entire political establishment, is simply a lie. Obama's escalation in Afghanistan will cost an additional \$30 billion a year. Thanks to an unprecedented government bailout of the banks, the top 23 Wall Street firms will hand out an estimated \$140 billion this year. The \$200 million deficit of the Detroit Public Schools—which serves 94,000 students—would be wiped out with the money being paid out to a half dozen investment bankers and traders this year.

At the heart of the struggle to defend and expand public education, and guarantee a decent living for teachers, is the question: What class controls the resources of society? Will these resources be subordinated to the interests of billionaire investors and executives? Or will they be controlled by the working class and directed toward the satisfaction of social needs?

Many workers supported Barack Obama with the expectation that he would reverse the hated policies of the Bush administration, including in education. Instead, the candidate of "change" has turned out to be merely another representative of the status quo.

This experience only confirms the fact that both parties represent the corporate and financial elite. Real change will not come through the two-party capitalist system, but in the mobilization of the entire working class in opposition to it. The working class needs its own party that will fight for its own interests.

The SEP is fighting to build a mass political party of the working class based on socialist policies, including: the transformation of the large banks and corporations into democratically-controlled and publicly-owned utilities; an immediate end to the neo-colonial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and a vast redistribution of wealth, including the expropriation of huge sums accumulated by the financial elite through speculation and fraud.

Break with the DFT! Form independent rank-and-file committees to prepare a general strike throughout Detroit!

The DFT is not in any sense a workers organization. Its main concern is to protect the bloated salaries and privileges of the trade union executives. By pushing the "Termination Incentive Plan" it is openly working with the school authorities to force hundreds, if not thousands, of experienced teachers to retire, so they can be replaced by a low-wage instructors, forced to work in charter schools without the slightest rights or input on how children are taught. In return, the DFT has been given assurances that it will continue to extract dues income from teachers, and will participate in the myriad of joint labor-management committees to police teachers.

"Dissident" figures like Steve Conn claim the DFT can be pressured into defending the interests of teachers. This is a lie. In the DFT, teachers confront an enemy as vicious as Bobb. If the contract is rejected, the DFT will not return with a better contract, but will join the effort to threaten and intimidate teachers into accepting the concessions.

The SEP supports a break with the DFT and the formation of a rank-and-file committee to coordinate opposition to the contract and prepare for strike action. An immediate appeal should be made to students, parents and teachers throughout the state to launch a campaign in defense of public education.

Preparations should be made for a general strike in the Detroit area, which will link up the struggles of teachers with those of city workers, auto workers, and the entire working class. There are already signs of growing opposition, including in the vote by Ford workers last month to overwhelmingly reject a contract supported by the company and the UAW. A coordinated fight of workers will become a spearhead for struggles throughout the country and internationally.

The struggle of teachers and workers requires a new political perspective, which takes as its starting point the need to break with the Democrats and Republicans and build the SEP as the mass socialist party of the working class.

We urge all teachers and workers who agree with this perspective to contact us today and make the decision to join the Socialist Equality Party.



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