

Corporate media denounces resistance by Detroit teachers

Jerry White

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Detroit's two daily newspapers have weighed in to attack public school teachers who have opposed the concessions agreement between the Detroit Federation of Teachers and the district's state-appointed financial director.

Both the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* ran libelous editorials this week following a mass meeting on December 6 where teachers shouted down DFT President Keith Johnson and other officials for accepting the deal.

In addition to the establishment of merit pay and the expansion of charter schools, the contract freezes wages, slashes medical benefits and reduces classroom preparation time. Most galling, however, is a union-proposed "Termination Incentive Plan" that would force teachers to give up \$500 a month from their paychecks, supposedly to "invest" in the cash-strapped district.

The December 10 editorial in the *Detroit Free Press* acknowledges there is "not much for teachers to like" in the offer. "But here's a thought," it adds smugly, "Maybe, given the enormity of the problems the school district faces at the moment, this contract negotiation ought not to be about what teachers want or can wrangle out of the school system. Maybe this should be about what Detroit's children need—both in financial and academic terms—to claw their way from the depths of educational futility."

In a similar vein, the *Detroit News* writes in an editorial published December 8, "Detroit Federation of Teachers union members face a clear choice on whether they should approve a new contract: embrace reforms that will boost student achievement or continue to destroy their jobs, their schools and the children about whom they profess to care."

Both papers are bitter over the vocal opposition to the DFT officials. "[T]he catcalls during a contract rally Sunday," the *Free Press* laments, "suggest an awful lot of city teachers won't be able to" find the "mental space" to

put the needs of the students first.

The *News* adds, "You wouldn't know students' educations are at stake if you listened to the teachers' comments made on Sunday at Cobo Center. The union's leaders presented a new contract, developed jointly with Detroit Public Schools' Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb. Union members booed."

The suggestion that teachers are greedy and uncaring is a contemptible lie. It is particularly rich coming from the media mouthpieces of the corporate and political forces, which have carried out a non-stop campaign to destroy public education. It is not the teachers but the Democrats and Republicans in Detroit and the state capital in Michigan, who have closed scores of schools, laid off thousands and slashed hundreds of millions from school budgets.

As for teachers, they already go above and beyond to provide the best learning environment they can, even though they are forced to work in dilapidated and dirty schools, lacking the most basic supplies, such as paper, pencils, textbooks and even toilet paper. It is commonplace for teachers to pay for supplies out of their own pockets, have family members clean classrooms because of the lack of janitors and make other sacrifices for their students.

At Sunday's mass meeting one teacher after another demanded smaller classroom sizes, more supplies and other improvements. This was rejected by the DFT, which echoed the lies of the city and state authorities that there is no money for education.

At the same time, DFT President Johnson insisted that they "not punish the children of Detroit because you are not satisfied with this benefits agreement" by rejecting the contract.

The meeting demonstrated the real class line-up in this struggle. By opposing the contract, teachers are fighting not only for themselves but to defend the right to public

education for all students.

The DFT speaks for the corporate-backed politicians—from Bobb, to Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, to President Obama and his Education Secretary Arne Duncan—who are deliberately undermining the public schools so they can use the crisis they have produced to justify their reactionary program of “school reform.”

While handing over trillions to the Wall Street banks and to fund its neo-colonial wars, the Obama administration has starved cities and states of funding for education and other vital services. What little money is available—the paltry \$4 billion nationwide being offered in the “Race to the Top” program—can only be accessed by districts that increase the use of charter schools and so-called “teacher accountability.”

These measures are aimed at establishing a class-based system of education, in which “priority students” receive the lion’s share of resources, the best schools and teaching technologies, while the vast majority of working class youth are dumped into substandard facilities.

The present disaster facing students in Detroit is being used to scapegoat the teachers. Feigning concern about the fate of Detroit students, the *Free Press* points to the results of national test scores released Tuesday, which show that fourth- and eighth-graders in Detroit Public Schools scored the worst in the nation in math.

“In many ways,” the *Free Press* says, “it would mark the height of sad irony if the city’s teachers, who are voting building-by-building on the contract over the next few weeks, were to reject the deal on the heels of test scores that show Detroit at the very bottom of the troubled national pile of big-city urban school districts.”

While conceding that “not all the responsibility for that falls on teachers,” the newspaper adds, “if Detroit students are performing as if they’d never been to school at all, a fair share of the burden must be shouldered by instructors.” The answer, the *Free Press* insists, is more teacher “accountability.”

What the newspaper editorialists know and do not want to admit is that the poor performance of the students is not the fault of teachers but the inevitable result of decades of attacks on the public schools by the big business and political interests the *Free Press* and *News* speak for. It is well known, for example, that the Detroit schools suffer from a chronic shortage of qualified math teachers after years of mass layoffs and budget cuts.

Moreover, the papers dare not point to the indissoluble

connection between the devastating social crisis in the city and the academic problems of its young people. Despite their best efforts, teachers cannot, on their own, overcome the consequences of the deprivation and official neglect that prevails outside of the classroom. It is no coincidence that the dropout rate in Detroit’s schools—75 percent—is equivalent to the percentage of children who qualify for free lunches due to poverty.

Having nothing but contempt for working class youth, capitalist politicians like President Obama say such conditions should not be used as an “excuse for failure.” Everything, they claim, can be overcome through personal “responsibility.” Teachers, parents and students “must be held accountable!” they demand.

Of course, the only ones not held accountable for this disaster are the corporate and financial elite that rules America and controls both parties. Since 1970, three quarters of Detroit’s manufacturing jobs have been wiped out, as part of the policy of deindustrialization pursued by the capitalist class, which increasingly relied on speculation to amass huge fortunes.

With the collapse of this financial house of cards, American capitalism is essentially carrying out the “Detroit-ization” of the US economy, consigning large sections of the working population to joblessness.

Under conditions in which the vast majority of working class youth are faced with a future of permanent unemployment, the ruling elite sees the guarantee of a decent education to all children as an unacceptable drain on its profits.

This only underscores the fact that the struggle to defend and improve public education requires a struggle against capitalism, and its replacement with socialism, a society based on the satisfaction of human needs, not the private enrichment of a financial aristocracy.



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