

Detroit teachers union launches intimidation campaign to push sellout deal

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With 7,000 school teachers voting on a new three-year contract this week, the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) is conducting a campaign of intimidation and lies to break the resistance of school teachers to the deal, which includes sweeping wage and benefit concessions and a fundamental assault on public education for the district's 94,000 students.

In the week since the December 6 mass meeting of teachers—where DFT President Keith Johnson and other union executives were shouted down and denounced for supporting the contract—the DFT has been working overtime to push through the deal. At a subsequent union meeting on December 10, Johnson called the police and threatened to have members who were demanding his resignation arrested.

This was followed up with a letter sent out by the DFT to every member and a recorded phone message from Johnson threatening teachers with even more concessions, including an immediate 10 percent cut, if they voted down the contract. The letter also said a rejection could lead to the district declaring bankruptcy and a unilateral cut in wages and benefits. Some of these threats were even printed on the ballots given to teachers to vote on the deal.

In its efforts to intimidate teachers, the DFT is walking in lockstep with the district's state-appointed emergency financial director, Robert Bobb, and the Detroit news media. Bobb has repeated that teachers have received the district's "final and best offer," and suggested he might throw the district into bankruptcy if the deal is rejected. Over the weekend, Bobb said, "To those teachers who are trying to force their members back to the table: the negotiations are over."

For its part, the news media has sought to exploit the school crisis—including recent test results showing that

Detroit has the lowest math scores of any major city—to scapegoat the teachers and demand they accept the terms of the contract. (See "Corporate media denounces resistance by Detroit teachers")

Among teachers there is widespread opposition to the agreement, which freezes wages, slashes medical benefits and includes a union proposal to deduct \$10,000 from the paychecks of teachers over the next two years—or \$500 a month—as a supposed "investment" in the district. The latter, termed the "Termination Incentive Plan," is aimed at forcing hundreds of better paid, senior teachers to leave their jobs so the district can shrink its workforce and replace them with lower paid instructors with no rights.

The agreement accepts merit pay, the expansion of charter schools—or so-called "priority schools"—and various punitive "accountability" schemes, which teachers in Detroit have steadfastly opposed for years. The premise of these measures is that teachers are responsible for the educational crisis and must be subjected to the constant threat of disciplinary action or termination to boost "student performance."

Far from addressing the real cause of the crisis—the crushing levels of poverty among Detroit students and the virtual collapse of the schools after decades of budget cuts and layoffs—Bobb is slashing the budget even deeper, closing more schools and laying off more school personnel. Similar cuts are being imposed by Michigan's Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm on a statewide level.

Detroit is being used as a test case by the Obama administration and its education secretary, Arne Duncan, to expand the use of charter schools, merit pay and other reactionary "reforms" on a national scale. These measures will create further inequities in the school system by channeling resources to charter

schools, while starving the remaining schools—attended by the vast majority of students—of financing.

From the standpoint of the financial elite, which the Obama administration represents, universal access to education is considered an unacceptable drain on profits, particularly since American capitalism is condemning the majority of working class youth to a future of permanent unemployment.

The DFT and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, is playing a key role in imposing this reactionary agenda. In return, the union apparatus hopes to retain its ability to collect dues money from highly exploited teachers, as well as gain positions in the restructured school system.

The DFT hopes to jointly manage the “priority schools” with the school district. Under the terms of the contract, instructors will be hired and fired at will with no regard to seniority. They will be forced to work longer hours, without overtime pay, and teach for an extended school year.

A Selection Committee, consisting of school authorities and the DFT, will screen all applicants who want to work at the priority schools—giving the union apparatus the power of a hiring boss and labor enforcer. According to the contract, the joint committee will assure that each school has a “dedicated staff,” i.e., teachers who will not resist the “unusual requirements” listed in the contract, including “creative teaching methods” and “creative scheduling.”

At the same time, the school board will have a free hand to lay off more experienced and better paid teachers throughout the rest of the school system, while protecting priority school teachers from job cutting.

In a paid advertisement in the *Sunday New York Times*, Randi Weingarten, the president of AFT, praised the Detroit contract, saying it was “much more than a collective bargaining agreement; it is a covenant between educators and administrators...”

Weingarten makes clear that the AFT and DFT want to be full partners in Obama’s school restructuring plans. She boasts that the agreement includes “several reforms that will drive the enhancement of student achievement, including school based bonuses, peer assistance and review and a new, comprehensive teacher evaluation system.”

At the same time, the AFT president said, “both parties recognized the severe financial conditions of the

district and sought innovative approaches to save money,” including the pay and health care cuts “that will save the district millions.”

In a separate press release, Weingarten said the educational provisions in the deal “would make it one of the most progressive big-city teacher contracts of our day.” Praising Bobb and the other school authorities, she said, “DPS leaders answered the union’s call to develop these reforms ‘with us, not to us,’ and the result is a collaborative approach to implementing best practices in Detroit’s public schools.”

Indeed, the AFT has been instrumental in helping the Obama administration draft its “Race to the Top” plan, in which states and school districts must accept merit pay, teacher evaluations, charter schools and other so-called “reforms” in exchange for federal money. The AFT praised Duncan for including it in teacher evaluation plans.

The resistance of rank-and-file teachers in Detroit has thrown a wrench into the plans of the DFT and AFT, and the corporate and political interests they serve. The reaction of the union apparatus to this opposition demonstrates the real relationship between the working class and these organizations.

The DFT does not represent teachers—it is a tool of the very same forces that are systematically destroying public education. By taking a stand against this contract, teachers are not only fighting to defend their living standards, but standing up for the right to quality education for all young people.

Such a struggle requires a complete break with the DFT and the development of a political movement against capitalism and the two political parties that defend it—Obama’s Democrats and the Republicans—and the struggle for the socialist reorganization of the economy to redirect society’s resources to meet human need, not profit.



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