Detroit—a model for nationwide assault on public education

Joe Kishore
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The city of Detroit's plan to shut down dozens of schools will have devastating consequences for communities and thousands of working class youth. It is part of moves, backed by the Obama administration, to dismantle public education in the city, expand charter schools and shut off services in the most impoverished areas.

The aim is to more directly subordinate education to the profit interests of the corporate elite that controls Detroit. On Tuesday, Detroit Public Schools Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb said that his new proposal "has a very strong market-driven component to it."

On Wednesday, the Detroit Public Schools released a plan to close 45 facilities by June, bringing the number of schools closed in the city to more than 100 since 2006. This amounts to nearly half of the total number of public schools. Another 13 schools would be closed by 2012.

The plan was drawn up by Bobb, who was appointed by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm. Included in Bobb's list of schools to be shut down are many well-known fixtures of communities, including Cooley, Osborn, Kettering, Northwestern and Southwestern High Schools. Dozens of elementary and middle schools in surrounding areas will also be closed.

The drastic steps being taken in Detroit are part of a nationwide process, in which states and local school districts are responding to budget deficits through the dismantling of the public education system. Last week, the Kansas City, Missouri school district voted to close 28 of 61 schools and cut 700 of 3,000 jobs.

The measures are being spearheaded by the Obama administration, which is aggressively pushing for the expansion of for-profit charter schools and the closure of the worst performing schools—i.e., those in the most impoverished areas. The federal government is also backing a campaign to victimize teachers for the crisis in education, including Obama's public support for the mass firing of teachers in Central Falls, Rhode Island last month. (See "Obama education plan to push competitive funding")

Detroit is seen as a test case for this right-wing campaign, as indicated last year by Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who declared the city "ground zero" in the fight for education reform. Duncan has publicly praised Bobb.

Bobb is also working closely with a series of philanthropic organizations to expand charter schools in Detroit. (See "Detroit media, politicians back corporate plan to privatize education")

In addition to closing dozens of schools, Bobb has also led an attack on Detroit teachers, working with the Detroit Federation of Teachers to push through major concessions in pay and benefits last year. The district is planning on eliminating an additional 2,100 teacher and staff positions next year.

The Detroit Schools and other school districts justify the destruction of schools by citing declining enrollment, but this is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The closing of schools will increase the drop-out rate while also driving more students into charter schools, many of which are controlled by business interests with close ties to the Detroit political establishment.

The collapse of enrollment has in fact proceeded at a far more rapid pace than the decline in the population as a whole. A report in *Crain's Detroit Business* noted, "While the city has lost roughly half its population in the last fifty years, decline in the DPS has dropped by almost half in the last eight years, dropping from 164,496 in the 2002-03 school year to 87,754 in the current year…"

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The city expects a decline of 30,000 over the next five years. In other words, by 2015 the number of students in the public school system is expected to be about a third of what it was at the beginning of the century.

As if to underscore his hope that many students will leave the public school system, Bobb said that high school students will have to take the city bus to attend schools that will now be located much further from their homes. This is under conditions in which the city has severely cut back on bus services.

Bobb has said that he hopes the city will invest in upgrading the remaining schools, but much of this proposed work is conditioned on the approval of a $500 million bond issued at some unspecified later date.

Bobb's proposal for schools to be shut down was drawn up in coordination with plans announced by Detroit Mayor David Bing to significantly downsize Detroit, including shutting down of city services in the most impoverished areas. (See, "Mayor plans to relocate poor residents to 'downsize' Detroit")

Broad sections of Detroit are mired in Depression-like conditions, with real unemployment at over 50 percent, abandoned and burnt-out homes and desperate poverty. Earlier this month, the mayor declared, "If we can incentivize some of the folks that are in those desolate areas, they can get a better situation. If they stay where they are I absolutely cannot give them all the services that they require."

The push to "rationalize" services in cities throughout the country has been promoted in particular by the Brookings Institute, a Democratic Party-oriented think tank.

In an article published in the *Detroit News* on Wednesday ("School closure plan dovetails with Detroit's downsizing effort"), the newspaper wrote, "In choosing which schools to close, district planners consulted with the city to try to mesh the plan with efforts to retain population in stable areas or those targeted for revitalization."

The mayor's communication director, Karen Dumas, said, "Closures and rehabilitation of schools should be part of a comprehensive land use strategy. As we work to stabilize Detroit's neighborhoods, we are working with several entities, including DPS."

Bing has also indicated that he is seeking to privatize city services, including selling the Public Lighting Department to DTE Energy, which has recently sharply increased rates for consumers and has shut off utilities for hundreds of thousands of families in the area.

As part of his plan to slash services, there are indications that the mayor is seeking to deliberately undercount Detroit's population in the coming census. According to a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* ("Detroit's Smaller Reality: Mayor Plans to Use Census Tally Showing Decline as a Benchmark in Overhaul," February 27), "The mayor is looking to the diminished tally, down from 951,270 in 2000, as a benchmark in his bid to reshape Detroit's government, finances and perhaps even its geography to reflect its smaller population and tax base. That means, in part, cutting city services and laying off workers."

The city is making no effort to try to ensure a full population count, instead allowing nonprofit groups to take the lead. However, the *Journal* notes, "with a population that is widely dispersed and largely poor and minority—two segments traditionally disinclined to fill out government paperwork—Detroit is already difficult to count."

"With no high-profile census push, the city risks an undercount that would mean forgoing millions of dollars in federal funding."

The corporate elite that runs Detroit would more than make up for the loss of federal funding through the slashing of city services and the ever more naked subordination of the city's population to the profit demands of big business.

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