For a working class movement to defend public education!

Socialist Equality Party
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This statement will be distributed at "town hall" meetings called by the Detroit Public Schools to discuss proposals to close 44 more schools this year. Click here for a pdf version to download and distribute.

Detroit Public Schools Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb is holding a series of meetings throughout Detroit, ostensibly to get public input on a plan to close 44 schools in Detroit this year and 13 more in 2012. Coming on top of dozens already shut down, these cuts will mean nearly half the total number of schools open in 2006 will be closed.

These "town hall" meetings are a fraud. The agenda is tightly controlled to prevent any real public input. In any case, Bobb—backed by the corporate elite, Detroit Mayor David Bing and Governor Jennifer Granholm—has already made his decision. Whatever the level of public opposition, he is determined to push through massive cuts.

The claim by Bobb and others that these cuts are intended to "improve" education is a contemptible lie. The impact on the city of Detroit, suffering from Depression-like conditions, will be devastating. Many of the schools slated for closure are fixtures of communities already struggling to get by. Thousands of students and their families will be dislocated or driven out of the school system altogether. At least another 1,500 school employees will lose their jobs.

The aim of the measures is to more directly subordinate education to the profit interests of the corporate elite that controls Detroit. Bobb has said his goal is "to create a purely market driven school district" and work toward "partnerships with the business community. Some of those eager to promote charter schools and the "market" have pitched in to give Bobb an additional $145,000 in income this year, on top of his base salary of $280,000.

In addition to shutting down schools, the Detroit Public School District has waged a campaign against teachers and staff. As part of the school shutdowns, the district is planning on eliminating an additional 2,100 teacher and staff positions next year.

The school closure plan has been drawn up in close coordination with proposals from multi-millionaire Detroit mayor Bing to "downsize" Detroit by dismantling broad sections of the city and cutting off services to the most impoverished areas. As for those who live in the regions that will be abandoned, Bing declared, "I absolutely cannot give them all the services that they require"—including education. Broad sections of the working class will be confined to even more crowded and underfunded schools, while a decent education will be made available for only a small minority.

Similar measures are being carried out throughout the state and the country. As politicians in Lansing and Washington stand by, schools are being shut down in district after district, and teachers are under attack. Earlier this month, Kansas City, Missouri voted to close 28 of its 61 schools and lay off 700 of 3,000 jobs. In a move praised by Obama before the Chamber of Commerce, a school district in Central Falls, Rhode Island moved to fire all of its teachers.

Detroit is a test case for an all-out attack on public education, spearheaded by the Obama administration. With his "race to the top" program, the Obama administration is continuing the reactionary agenda of the bipartisan No Child Left Behind Act signed into law by Bush. Meager federal funds for education are conditioned on expanding charter schools, shutting down schools in the most distressed areas, and blaming teachers for a crisis of education.

To save our schools and communities, the working class must organize and fight back. Education is a vital necessity for all workers and young people. It is not a luxury that should be slashed to the bone to meet the budget-cutting demands of the corporate and financial elite.

A program to defend public education must include:

1. Stop all school closures, privatizations and budget cuts! End the victimization of teachers!

The political establishment justifies school shutdowns by pointing to declining enrollment, but this is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Billions must be expended to ensure quality public education for all student youth. Schools must be rebuilt and equipped with new supplies, textbooks, and technology. The SEP opposes the destruction of public education in favor of charter schools.

The attempt to scapegoat teachers for the crisis in education is

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aimed at pitting workers against each other and shielding those who are truly responsible. Teachers are engaged in a heroic effort to educate youth, confronting the impact of social decay and budget cutting. Often teachers are forced to pay out of pocket to give their students the most basic necessities. Teacher pay and benefits should be increased and all benefits restored. Thousands more teachers must be hired to reduce class sizes and workloads.

2. End utility shutoffs and home foreclosures! For a public works program to guarantee jobs!

It is impossible for students to get a decent education when they are homeless, hungry or live without heat and electricity. Once the wealthiest city in the country, Detroit is now at the center of the economic crisis, with a real unemployment rate of close to 50 percent. Last year, DTE Energy cut off 221,000 homes in southeast Michigan from utilities. In February, 20,000 homes were foreclosed in the state, a shocking 59 percent increase from last year.

The fight to defend education must be linked up with the struggle to defend jobs and living standards of all working people. The SEP calls for an immediate end to all utility shutoffs and home foreclosures. A massive public works program is required to guarantee good-paying jobs for all. There is no shortage of work to be done—including the rebuilding of our schools and communities.

3. Increase taxes on the rich! For the nationalization of the banks and major corporations!

Students and workers must reject the claim that there is no money for education. Trillions have been expended to bail out the banks and hundreds of billions are spent each year to fund the US war machine. As a result of Obama's bank bailouts, the corporate and financial elite that created the economic crisis is doing better than ever. The budget deficit in Detroit is a pittance compared to the wealth of the financial elite. The bonuses handed out to the top Wall Street firms last year could pay for the budget deficits of all 50 states in the US!

There are resources; it is a question of who controls these resources and how they are distributed. The wealthy have no interest in educating workers destined for unemployment or menial jobs, and it is their interests that dictate government policy.

To break the economic and political grip of the financial elite over society, the banks and major corporations must be nationalized and placed under the democratic control of working people. The enormous sums accumulated by a tiny layer must be reclaimed to meet pressing social needs.

4. For independent working class organizations to defend public education! Break with the Democrats and Republicans!

Many hoped the election of Obama would bring an end to Bush's policies of war, attacks on democratic rights and handouts to the wealthy. The last year has demonstrated that it is impossible to enact serious change through the two-party system.

The defense of public education cannot be realized by appealing to Democratic and Republican politicians in Detroit, Lansing and Washington—the very people who are carrying out the attack. For their part, the trade unions, including the Detroit Federation of Teachers and the United Auto Workers, work closely with the Democratic Party and the corporations in enforcing concessions on the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of independent committees to unify all sections of the working class—including teachers, school staff, city workers, auto workers, parents and student youth—in the fight to defend public education. These organizations must be completely free from the Democratic and Republican Parties and the trade union apparatus.

A socialist program for the working class

The attack on public education throughout the country is part of an international campaign to make the working class pay for the economic crisis. After guaranteeing the wealth of the rich, the call from the government and media is now for austerity and cost-cutting.

The satisfaction of the basic needs of the population, including education, immediately confronts the fact that every aspect of economic and political life is subordinated to the money-mad drive for personal wealth of a small minority, at the expense of the vast majority.

Public education is based on the fundamentally egalitarian principle that *everyone* should have access to quality education. As such, it is incompatible with an economic system whose fundamental premise is *inequality*.

The defense of education is therefore bound up with the socialist transformation of economic life. The forces of production must be publicly owned and democratically controlled, in the interest of social need, not private profit.

The working class needs its own party that fights for this perspective. The SEP urges all those who are looking for a way to fight to attend the Emergency Conference on the Social Crisis & War in Ann Arbor, Michigan on April 17-18. The conference will discuss a new program and perspective for the working class. For more information and to register, click here. To contact or join the SEP, click here.

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