

Ypsilanti, Michigan, board votes to close schools, impose layoffs

Our correspondents
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Over the broad popular opposition to school closings among city residents, Ypsilanti Public Schools board members approved a plan to close two of the city's seven remaining schools, and eliminate a third of the teaching staff over the next two years. The board voted on the plan March 22 before a crowd of 100 parents, teachers, and other concerned residents in the public high school auditorium.

Under the plan, Chapelle Elementary and East Middle School will be shuttered at the end of the current academic year. Students will be shifted into the three remaining elementary schools, and the city's seventh and eighth graders will attend a single middle school. Combined with the lay-off of more than 20 teachers this year and another 20 next year, the already high student-teacher ratio in classrooms is certain to spike.

Ypsilanti is a small city near Detroit and formerly a major industrial center for auto and auto parts manufacturing. Last year's closure of the Willow Run transmission plant on the east side of Ypsilanti, part of the Obama administration's forced bankruptcy of General Motors, inflicted a devastating economic blow to the region. An estimated 1,100 workers lost their jobs, and Washtenaw County saw a loss of some \$3.8 million in tax revenue because of the closure. Parts manufacturer Automotive Components Holding Co., a holding company of Visteon and Ford, sold off its Ypsilanti complex in December; the million-square-foot plant was demolished earlier this month.

Like scores of other districts in Michigan, Ypsilanti is operating under an enormous budget deficit accumulated over the past decade. Education funding, tied to sales tax revenue, has plummeted under the impact of the collapse of the auto industry and high unemployment in Michigan. In the past year, with unemployment rising to levels not seen since the Great Depression, sharply declining home values, and factory closures, the state's public education fund has run deep into the red. The fund has a projected \$400 million shortfall for fiscal year 2010-2011.

Education is under attack by the political establishment at every level. Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm ordered hundreds of dollars in per-pupil funding cuts in the last few months, compelling local districts across the state to steeply curtail their budgets. In addition, the Obama administration has forced cash-strapped districts to compete for paltry sums of federal money by implementing the administration's agenda of replacing public

schools with privately run charter schools and attacking the jobs, living standards and working conditions of teachers and other school employees.

In December, the Ypsilanti schools administration submitted a "Deficit Elimination Plan" to the state in December outlining a series of cuts to eliminate its \$6.4 million budget deficit. Proposals to close schools, "repurpose" buildings, replace teachers and courses with for-profit online classes, and other draconian measures were presented to the public in January in supposed "community workshops."

In imposing its agenda, city and school officials have relied on the unions to dissipate and suppress opposition from school employees, parents and students. At the January 25 school board meeting, the presidents of the Ypsilanti Education Association and Ypsilanti Support Staff Association expressed their support for the plan, saying they were "on board." YEA President Kelly Powers told the board that the union recognized teachers would be laid off, and that it would act as "a part of the transition process." "Face it folks," she said, "We're overstaffed."

By contrast, the plans drew immediate opposition from parents, teachers, staff, and other residents, who organized an independent meeting February 3, attended by nearly 100 people, to analyze the budget and the origin of the funding shortfall. Dozens of parents and workers spoke passionately in defense of their schools and living conditions in the city.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party played a key role in organizing opposition to the school closings. They encouraged parents and school employees to appeal to the widest sections of the working class for support and to reject efforts by the trade unions and the Democratic Party to stifle and defeat their struggle.

Parents were immediately confronted with political questions. The opposition was posed with two roads: one accepting the domination of the Democratic Party and the dictates of the financial elite, which claims there is "no money" for public schools; and one striking out independently and fighting to build a powerful movement that places the needs of working people—including high quality public education—before the profit interests of the banks and corporations.

At the meeting, a group of parents and school workers formed a committee to unify parents and workers from all the schools. The basis of the committee was opposition to all cuts; independence from the school board, unions, and political establishment; and the fight for the unity of all parents, school employees and other

working people across the state. Members, including parents representing several Ypsilanti schools, bus drivers, teachers, day care workers, custodians and other staff workers, recognized these principles as preconditions for the defense of public education.

The establishment of the committee was an important step forward not only for workers in Ypsilanti. In virtually every district in the state boards are voting to shutter schools, cut jobs, and eliminate programs. In Detroit, 45 schools are slated for closure and some 2,100 jobs are now on the chopping block. Emergency Financial Director Robert Bobb, with the complete support of the city, state, and federal political establishment, is seeking to destroy public education and replace it with a patchwork of for-profit charter schools and public schools staffed with a newly privatized, poorly paid workforce. (See, “Detroit—a model for nationwide assault on public education”) Southfield’s school board is planning to shutter two elementary schools and outsource staffing jobs. (See, “Opposition mounts to Michigan education cuts”) The Ann Arbor school district is proposing at least 70 teacher and staff cuts, the privatization of bussing, custodial work, and many program cuts and fees. In Saline, just south of Ypsilanti, school closures and other cuts are also being implemented.

After the parents’ organizing meeting in Ypsilanti, the school board was met by an overflowing crowd of hundreds of parents, school workers and residents at its next meeting on February 8. During the meeting Ypsilanti Education Association President Powers postured as a supporter of the parents and school employees, suggesting that cuts should come from “the top” first. This gesture was meaningless, however, as Powers acknowledged that the YEA had already offered \$1 million in “savings” through pay cuts and layoffs.

The YEA and other unions fully accept that the working class must pay for the bankruptcy of the state’s school districts, which is the result of the reckless speculation of the Wall Street banks and the multi-trillion dollar bailout. Explicitly endorsing the claim that there is no money to provide decent education for all students, the YEA functioned as a cost-cutting partner and joined the board’s efforts to pit different sections of parents and school employees against each other.

Unfortunately a group of parents from the Chapelle Elementary School fell into this trap, and lacking any independent perspective for struggle urged the board to save their school by shutting East Middle School and the citywide kindergarten instead. By the time of the March 22 vote all they could ask for was a “smooth transition” to another school.

Members of the Ypsilanti action committee put forward a principled defense of the schools at the March 22 board meeting, and warned that the school closings were only the beginning. “Irreparable changes that are being implemented on our school district are only the tip of the iceberg for the cuts coming in the next few years,” one parent stated.

“We are facing a domino line of similar cuts, closures, consolidations, and clawbacks. Decent free schools, run by decently paid teachers and staff—the administration calls these ‘luxuries’! And we can already see, not far ahead of us, the point at which the public schools in Ypsilanti will be nothing but a

historical remnant—a facet of society from an earlier era. We cannot allow this to happen!”

Another committee member stated, “The purpose of public schools is not to make money. It’s contradictory to the mission of public schools to insist that they have to abide by the same fiscal rules that govern businesses in the market. The purpose of public education is to educate the poorest children among us, those whose parents can’t afford to pay for a decent education, and in some cases can’t afford to provide a decent meal without a free school lunch. When you accept the rationale that school cuts are necessary, you betray the mission of public education itself.”

The developments in Ypsilanti are instructive. Like the Democrats and Republicans in Washington and Lansing, the local school officials defied public sentiment because they answer to the most powerful financial and corporate interests, not working people. Any school district that does not “balance its books” will face an onslaught from the big investors who control the municipal and school bond markets.

The fight to defend education requires a political counter-offensive by the working class. Public education and all other basic infrastructure must be run in the interests of society as a whole, controlled by the workers themselves. The wealth created by the working class must be re-appropriated from the parasites at the pinnacle of society in order to properly fund schools, the health care system, ensure public health and repair infrastructure. This requires a fight for socialism.

The Socialist Equality Party, its youth movement, the International Students for Social Equality, and the World Socialist Web Site are holding an Emergency Conference on the Social Crisis and War in Ann Arbor, Michigan on April 17 and 18 to discuss a socialist program to defend the working class and a strategy for building a mass political movement in the US and internationally to fight for it.

All those looking for the means to fight school closings and defend public education should make plans to attend. For further information and to register for the conference, click here.



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