

Michigan teacher pension “reform” attacks public education

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The bill signed last Wednesday by Michigan Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm changing the Michigan Public Schools Employees Retirement System (MPERS) is a sweeping attack on public school teachers and the state’s educational system. The bill, which passed both state houses with considerable bipartisan support, is designed to induce a large segment of retirement-eligible teachers to leave the profession and replace them with new hires at a fraction of the cost.

By ridding the schools of more experienced teachers, the politicians in Lansing not only aim to save money at the expense of educators and students. They hope to break the resistance to the expansion of charter schools and the imposition of merit pay and other punitive “accountability” schemes championed by corporate opponents of public education, with the full backing of the Obama administration.

In order to induce them to retire, the state is offering veteran teachers a paltry increase in the multiplier that determines the size of their pension, which will rise from the current level of 1.5 percent to between 1.55 to 1.6 percent. This will be funded by making teachers who remain contribute an additional 3 percent of their pay towards retiree medical benefits—in other words, by imposing a 3 percent pay cut.

Current employees have no guarantee that by the time they retire, they will receive health insurance as part of their pension, as language that covered this very question was removed from the legislation.

In addition, the newly hired teachers that the state is hoping will replace retirees will be forced into a so-called “hybrid” plan that replaces part of their pension with a 401K. New hires will not be eligible for pensions until they turn 60.

In one of the more blatantly punitive aspects of this

legislation, retirees who leave after July 1, 2010 will lose their pension and health care benefits if they are rehired back into the school system and make more than one-third of their average final compensation, or if they work for an independent contractor providing services to the public schools (e.g. a charter school). In essence, more experienced teachers will henceforth be blacklisted from the profession, opening the way for the charters and school authorities to exploit younger, less experienced teachers.

Furthermore, since charter school employees are not required to join MPERS, the spread of these for-profit education entities at the expense of the public schools will further erode the pool of money earmarked for retired teachers. In short, the legislation contributes to the development of a situation in which state pensions for teachers will be eliminated altogether because of a lack of funds.

Granholm and the state legislature are hoping that 28,000 teachers statewide, or half of those currently employed in the state’s public schools, and whose combined age and years of service add up to 80, will take the buyout. According to the governor’s estimates, this will save the state \$3 billion over the next decade.

Contrary to Granholm’s claim that the bill “will help prepare students for success in the 21st century,” it will further devastate the school system, as tens of thousands of the most experienced and highly qualified teachers are driven out. New hires earning substandard wages will be placed into overcrowded, under-resourced classrooms, without a large number of veteran teachers to rely upon as mentors. When test scores and conditions in the schools deteriorate, they will be blamed for “failing” schools and face termination.

If, in the likelihood that far fewer than the hoped-for

28,000 teachers take the buyout, Granholm and the state legislature will look for other ways to impose massive cuts on the school system, insisting that veteran teachers are responsible for the crisis because they failed to leap at the state's "generous" retirement offer. Frustrated young graduates from Michigan's education programs will be told that they cannot find employment because supposedly "burnt-out" retirement-eligible teachers refuse to leave the job.

The Michigan Education Association (MEA), representing a large segment of the state's teachers, has opposed the bill, but its opposition has consisted of little more than empty rhetoric combined with calls for teachers to appeal to the very same corporate-backed politicians, including Granholm, who are spearheading the assault on education.

The Detroit Federation of Teachers has also formally opposed the bill, but this is just as disingenuous. In recent years, the DFT has been urging older teachers to retire, in open acceptance of the downsizing of the district and the spread of charter schools. In defiance of its membership, the DFT collaborated with Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb, appointed by Granholm, to impose merit pay, cut teachers' wages and benefits and pave the way for the privatization of the school district by multimillionaire charter proponents.

Like the AFT, the MEA promoted Obama as a defender of teachers who would overturn the reactionary No Child Left Behind (NCLB) measures. They claimed that Education Secretary Arne Duncan was a "partner" in the White House. Rather than dumping NCLB, the Obama administration has accelerated the attack on public education and like his Republican predecessors has championed bogus "accountability" schemes to scapegoat teachers for the impact of years of budget cuts, layoffs and the worsening social crisis.

The AFT and MEA, just like the United Auto Workers, are concerned only with defending the income and perks of the trade union apparatus, even as its membership rolls plummet. That is why it is collaborating with Obama and Duncan in the assault on public education.

The MEA demonstrations and informational pickets planned for this week behind the slogan "Enough is Enough: Stop the Attacks, Invest in Public Schools" are

designed to give teachers a chance to let off steam and promote the misconception that some section of the Democratic Party can be made to change course. Their aim is to keep growing anger over conditions in the schools within the safe confines of official politics.

The Obama administration and the Democrats are spearheading the attacks on public education. Even as they ensure that trillions of dollars are handed over to Wall Street and made available to wage war, they insist that there is no money available to pay for education. Obama's endorsement of the mass firing of educators in Central Falls, Rhode Island earlier this year and his reactionary "Race to the Top" program demonstrate the immense hostility of the Democratic Party to teachers and public education as a whole.

Like their Republican counterparts, the Democrats speak for the financial elite, which is amassing vast fortunes through the systematic impoverishment of the working population. Public education and all democratic rights cannot be sustained within a society dominated by such levels of inequality.

Only the building of a unified, mass movement of the working class, whose aim is the reallocation of society's wealth in the interest of human needs, is capable of opposing these conditions. The ill-gotten gains of the financial aristocracy must be confiscated and utilized to provide relief to the millions who have lost their jobs, homes and livelihoods, and to vastly expand public education and other essential services. Wall Street's stranglehold over society must be broken by transforming the banks into publicly owned and democratically controlled utilities, so society's resources can be allocated to raise the material and cultural level of all the people, not to enrich the idle few.

To begin this fight, teachers must break with the MEA and AFT and build independent rank-and-file committees of teachers, students and working people, to develop a political movement of the working class to defend public education and the right to a secure and decent standard of living for all.



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