

Michigan teachers protest state education cuts

Shannon Jones
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Thousands of teachers and supporters across the state of Michigan participated in rallies May 24 to oppose the ongoing assault on public education spearheaded by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm. The protests, called by the Michigan Education Association (MEA), took place in more than 40 communities including East Lansing, Holland, Bay City, Grand Rapids, Monroe and Plymouth.

Fueling teacher anger is the recent passage by the Michigan legislature of a bill implementing drastic changes in the Michigan Public Schools Employees Retirement System. The legislation, signed into law by Governor Granholm last week, is aimed at forcing thousands of more senior teachers to retire while imposing sharply reduced pension benefits on new teachers. The bill forces teachers to contribute an additional three percent of their salaries toward retiree medical benefits.

School districts across the state saw a \$165 per pupil reduction in state support last year. The funding cut resulted in thousands of teacher layoffs statewide, with some 80 percent of districts in the state implementing staff reductions. More cuts and layoffs are expected this year.

The teacher unions have offered no serious resistance to these attacks. In Detroit the American Federation of Teachers helped impose massive concessions on its membership last December. It has stood by while the appointed financial manager for Detroit Public Schools, Robert Bobb, has carried out the wholesale closure of schools and mass layoffs. The MEA for its part has worked to diffuse and demoralize rank-and-file opposition to the layoffs of teachers, administrators and support staff in scores of districts across the state.

Further, the MEA is supporting Michigan's second application to participate in the Obama Administration's reactionary "Race to the Top" program that targets teachers at "poorly performing" schools, while promoting the expansion of charter schools.

The fact that the MEA felt compelled to call an official protest against the education cuts speaks to the enormous anger building up among teachers. Despite doing little to build and publicize the rallies, there was a substantial turnout in a number of cities.

However, instead of advancing a program to unite teachers with workers and unemployed people across the state in a common struggle against the Granholm administration and the Republicans, the MEA is playing into the hands of the right wing by advancing the reactionary demand for an extension of the state sales tax, a regressive tax that impacts working people the hardest. Meanwhile, it continues to promote the illusion that protests can force the Granholm administration to change course.

Some 250 teachers and supporters took part in the rally in the city of Plymouth, including delegations from Wayne Westland, Plymouth Canton, Huron Valley, Garden City, Livonia and other Detroit Metro area school districts. SEP supporters distributed a copy of the statement "Michigan teacher pension 'reform' attacks public education," which outlines the role of the Granholm and Obama administrations in the assault on teachers.

The WSWs spoke to teachers and supporters attending the rally in Plymouth. A retired GM engineer came to the rally to support his wife, a public school teacher. He told the WSWs, "My pension was trashed in November 2008. Since then I have been riding on the benefits of my wife. Now she is being hit."

Commenting on Obama's "Race to the Top" program he said, "You had Clinton, Bush, Obama and

then they pull this. It will erode the plans for people who teach for a living. Kids learn at different rates. To turn education into a production line doesn't work. It will cause teachers to seek other employment."

He spoke bitterly of the role of the UAW. "I think the union is a business, doing a damn good job business on the backs of the workers."

His wife added, "Who is going to want to teach? Nobody went into teaching with the idea of getting rich, but they did want to be able to support themselves and retire with some benefits. I am very disappointed with Obama."

Rick Tannous, a teacher with 10 years seniority with the Huron Valley Schools spoke out against the Granholm administration's attacks on Michigan teachers. He told the WSWS, "They are pitting one worker against another. Many have been taking hits, so they are not so concerned about what happens to new teachers coming into the profession.

"I would agree that the Democrats are not allied with labor anymore. There was no secret about what Obama was going to do when he got in. The Democratic Party got money from labor, but they are not in alliance with us.

"The firing of the teachers in Rhode Island was the result of several things coming together. They claim there is a connection between testing and classroom teaching. There is little connection. The connection between families and the community to the school is more important. Not that every teacher is perfect. But it is not a one way street."

Speaking on the role of the MEA, Rick added, "You are seeing the leadership stopping the rank and file from doing anything about what is happening."



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