Thousands of Michigan teachers rally against education cuts

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As many as 4,000 teachers rallied at the steps of the Michigan capital building in Lansing last Thursday to protest the continuing attacks on public education. The rally, held under the slogan “Enough is Enough,” was called by the Michigan Education Association (MEA), the state’s largest teachers union and an affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA).

In the run-up to the rally the MEA’s website predicted 10,000 would attend, but the actual turnout was far less. Many attending donned red “Enough is Enough” T-shirts and displayed placards and signs saying, “Stop the Attack on Education” and “Invest in Education.”

MEA President Iris Salters made note of the presence of several United Auto Workers leaders at the rally, but no apparent effort to mobilize rank-and-file auto workers in defense of public education. Also significant was the lack of participation by Detroit teachers, who are facing the most savage cuts in school funding, and whose pay has been unilaterally slashed by the regime of the city’s state-appointed emergency financial manager, Robert Bobb.

The toothless character of the Lansing protest was apparent from the composition of the platform. Facing the protesters, on the steps of the capital building behind a partition of American flags, were several rows of politicians and union functionaries.

Featured speakers included Lansing Mayor Virg Bernero, a candidate for governor, state Senator Gretchen Whitmer and state Representative Jennifer Haase, all Democrats. Other speakers included MEA officials and David Hecker, president of the Michigan Federation of Teachers, affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the other teachers union.

In her opening remarks, MEA President Salters declared that “funding for education should be a priority, not an afterthought.” Her call “to elect officials who will fight for our schools, not against them,” rang particularly false given the fact that the MEA and the AFL-CIO have promoted Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm and the Democrats.

MEA Vice-President Steve Cook proposed that teachers send postcards and emails to their state representatives, “urging them to support adequate, equitable, stable funding for public education.”

By stable funding, the MEA means increasing the state’s sales tax, a regressive measure that will especially affect the working class and the poor, as well as taking money away from other programs.

MFT President Hecker gave lip service to the unity of the MEA and the MFT, in reality a plea for the unions to unite in imposing what he termed “education reforms that work” onto teachers. These “reforms” would include some form of merit pay, peer review (already being organized with the assistance of the Detroit Federation of Teachers in that city) and union-run charter schools.

The absence of Detroit teachers at the rally was mainly due to what amounted to a boycott by the DFT. The presence of several thousand Detroit teachers and school employees would have worked to shift the focus away from Michigan parochialism, toward the Obama administration’s destructive policies and the capitalist crisis that has devastated the city and large areas of Michigan.

The MEA and the AFT have already agreed in

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practice to the need for cost-cutting at the expense of teachers, schools workers and students. They will collaborate further with the state in policing rank-and-file teachers, so that additional “reforms” can be instituted with a minimum of disruption.

In opposition to this perspective, WSWS supporters distributed widely a statement of the Socialist Equality Party, “The political struggle to defend public education,” warning teachers that a genuine struggle to defend their jobs and working conditions is not possible if it is kept under the control of the unions.

A number of teachers in attendance were critical of the MEA’s policies. “Lobbying the politicians is not going to change anything,” Greg Queen, a teacher from Warren, Michigan, told the WSWS. “Rather than lobbying here, why aren’t they calling for united strike action by teachers?”

“The cuts in the schools are just horrific,” said Cindy Moritz from the Plymouth-Canton School District. “Education is being destroyed by these cuts, especially for children with special needs. And the Race to the Top is nothing but a re-bagged No Child Left Behind. Who benefits from it?”

Commenting on Race to the Top, Pete Puzzuoli, also from Plymouth-Canton, said, “My personal feeling is it is not effective. I don’t believe there should be any funding for this program.”

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