

Detroit News targets Michigan teachers for new round of pay cuts

Walter Gilberti
23 November 2010

In a front page article last Thursday the *Detroit News* reported on and encouraged a renewed assault by state and local authorities on pay and benefits for teachers throughout Michigan. The article, “High Teacher Pay Under Scrutiny,” by Mike Wilkinson, was an provocative piece designed to outrage and galvanize right-wing opponents of public education and the right of school employees to a decent living standard and economic security.

Neatly juxtaposed next to a report on growing hunger in the metro-Detroit area, and the inability of local food pantries to keep up with increased demand, the article is a heavy-handed attempt to portray teachers as greedy, unreasonable and insensitive to the plight of other workers who have suffered the loss of jobs, pay cuts and foreclosures.

(Last month the *Detroit News* carried out the same crude smear against the striking Detroit Symphony Orchestra musicians for resisting management’s demands for a 33 percent wage cut. See “The Detroit News and the DSO strike”)

The November 18 article represents a clear signal to the newly elected Republican governor, Rick Snyder, that he will have the full support of the corporate media in imposing draconian pay cuts on teachers, and that resistance to these attacks will not be tolerated. Citing the continuing fiscal crisis in Michigan, a crisis that has filtered down to affect once more affluent school districts, the article uses the word “mandatory” to describe the kind of cuts that are impending, and deemed perfectly reasonable by the political establishment.

According to the article, Michigan currently ranks 11th in teacher salary—with the average teacher making \$56,000. At the same time the state ranks 36th in

income, a product of the devastating decades-long de-industrialization of the state, centered on the collapse of the auto industry. There is no mention that the devastating attack on Michigan workers has resulted in an return to profitability for the auto companies and a windfall for Wall Street as seen in last week’s GM stock sale. It goes without saying that the *Detroit News* did not call for a pay cut for GM CEO Dan Akerson who was given \$9 million to run the company.

The article paints an utterly false picture of teachers, as having cushy jobs, with holidays and summers off. The fact that teaching is both a physically and mentally exhausting profession, that requires many teachers to constantly upgrade their skills, is characteristically ignored.

Most working class parents know this and identify with the plight of the teachers. Yet, the article, in the manner of a right-wing propaganda piece, claims that “public opinion” is entirely opposed to the present level of teachers’ salaries. It presents the call for pay cuts as the product of a groundswell of popular feeling—rather than what it is: the demand of corporations that no longer want to pay taxes to educate young people they have no intention of hiring.

Wilkinson bolsters his thesis with quotes from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, and the right-wing American Enterprise Institute. Rick Hess, director of education policy studies at AEI comments, “I think American are going to be surprised by how high teachers’ salaries are, and legislators are going to be surprised by the amount of support for reductions.”

While the average teacher make half as much, the article points to a small minority of teachers—around 300 in Michigan—who make \$100,000 a year, suggesting this is an outrageous sum for educators, including those who may possess advanced degrees in

their disciplines. It is clear the *Detroit News* values teachers far less than the hedge fund managers, which the newspaper no doubt believe contribute far more to society.

The premise of the article is that there is no money for education—without ever explaining why. State Senator Mike Bishop, Republican from Rochester, the outgoing Senate majority leader, insists, “We have to figure out how to do more with less.”

Bishop, the *News* reports, has proposed that public employees take a five percent pay cut and pay at least 20 percent of their insurance premiums. “Those savings would trim \$1.6 billion from the budget alone. Roughly half of the state’s teachers pay nothing in premiums for health insurance that is typically better than the private sector’s.”

Though that plan might not pass, Bishop tells the newspaper, wholesale changes are needed to avoid thousands of layoffs. “We need to do something to save our system,” he said.

The system Bishop is looking to save is capitalism, not the public education system, which is under an unrelenting attack by big business and every level of government, starting with the Obama administration. It goes without saying that the Republican state senator and the Democratic president have no intention of diverting the trillions spent on Wall Street bailout and the two wars into funding public education. Instead, they insist, teachers, like auto workers and every other section of the working class, must pay for the financial breakdown of the capitalist system and the preservation of the personal fortunes of the financial elite whose reckless speculation precipitated the crisis.

Far from being overpaid, teachers have suffered one attack on their wages, benefits and working conditions after another. Instructors in the Detroit Public Schools, for example, are already in the second year of a six percent pay cut, pushed through in 2009 with the collaboration of the Detroit Federation of Teachers.

The Obama administration has spearheaded this assault, while utilizing the anti-teacher nostrums of free market icons such as Milton Friedman. Unlike the Republican Right, however, the White House has collaborated with the teachers’ unions—the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association—to impose merit pay, the destruction of

tenure rights and the expansion of charter schools.

The *News* article ends with an ominous warning to teachers: that the unions are prepared to accept yet another round of wage and benefit concessions. “Many districts are in contract talks with teachers, and at the heart of those negotiations is not whether there will be concessions, but how deep.

“I think we’re realists, and as realists we’re open to talk about everything,” said Tony Lucchi, president of the Troy Education Association, whose contract expires in August, just as legislators will be trying to solve the state’s projected budget deficit.”

Teachers can place no confidence in the unions to defend their interests. New organizations of struggle, independent and opposed to these organizations, must be built in every school district, with the purpose of uniting school employees, parents and students in a common struggle to defend public education and all those who provide it. Such a struggle must take as its starting point the fight against both big business parties and the demand for a radical redistribution of wealth in order to allocate the necessary resources for a vast expansion and improvement of public education.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact