

Election run-off offers teachers no way forward

Break with the DFT! Build rank-and-file committees to defend public education

Socialist Equality Party
5 January 2011

The following statement will be distributed to teachers in the Detroit Public Schools who will be voting in a run-off election for the leadership of the Detroit Federation of Teachers beginning Wednesday. We urge teachers and their supporters to download and distribute this statement.

The run-off election for the leadership of the Detroit Federation of Teachers underscores the impasse teachers have reached with the DFT. What is posed is the urgent need to build a new organization to defend the right to public education in Detroit and throughout the US and guarantee the economic security of teachers and other school employees.

Neither faction of the DFT—the incumbent UTR (United for Teacher’s Rights) slate led by current DFT President Keith Johnson, or the DPE/SOS (Defend Public Education/Save Our Schools) slate led by Steve Conn—offers any way forward for teachers. On the contrary, both are tied to the Democratic Party establishment, which is spearheading the assault on public education and teachers.

After nearly two years of Johnson’s collaboration with Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb, teachers are rightfully disgusted with the current DFT leaders and are looking for way to fight. But they will find no alternative in Conn and his perspective.

Despite the decades of betrayals by the DFT and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, Conn opposes a break with this rotten organization and insists that teachers pin their hopes on the pipe dream that the DFT and AFT can be reformed.

Johnson is only the latest DFT leader to sell out teachers and work with successive Democratic Party

administrations to force educators, students and parents to pay for the bankrupting of the city schools. On a national scale, AFT President Randi Weingarten is collaborating with Obama, his Education Secretary Arne Duncan, and billionaires like Bill Gates to impose merit pay, punitive accountability schemes and the expansion of charter schools.

The only condition the AFT and DFT insist on is that the union apparatus get a seat at the table to jointly impose school “reform” with management. The chief concern of the union executives is that they will be able to continue to collect union dues from teachers even if they are paid poverty wages and have no rights.

This will not change if Conn is elevated to the top position of the DFT. Conn and his group have been cultivated over more than 20 years to function as a safety valve to contain and smother rank-and-file opposition to the DFT, including during the 1999 and 2006 strikes.

Just as they uphold the authority of the union apparatus, Conn and his supporters have worked assiduously to prevent teachers from breaking with the Democratic Party and fighting to build a political movement against the two big business parties and the profit system they defend.

Conn is a long-time member of the Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action & Integration, and Fight for Equality By Any Means Necessary (BAMN), a middle class protest organization that allies itself with Democrats like Jesse Jackson and John Conyers on the basis of identity and racial politics. Far from overcoming social inequality, such politics have helped create a black business and political elite, which has enriched itself at the expense of the majority of the

population—including African American and white workers.

BAMN joined the cynical campaign to convince voters that the election of Obama would reverse Bush's reactionary policies and lead to progressive change—telling black workers his election “would be an assertion of their long-denied rightful place in American history.” If the experience with Obama has taught anything, it is that the essential division in America is class, not race.

This has not stopped Conn and BAMN from insisting that “racism” is the central reason for the deterioration of Detroit's schools. On this basis, BAMN has worked closely with the black Democratic Party establishment in Detroit. It filed a joint lawsuit with the Detroit School Board against Bobb, claiming the board represented the people of Detroit against corporate interests trying to take over the schools.

Well before Bobb came on the scene, however, the school board was appointing pro-business school superintendents, including Deborah McGriff (now partner in the NewSchools Venture Fund)—who closed schools, attacked teachers and expanded charter schools. Moreover, the political conditions for the takeover of the schools by Bobb were created by the school board itself, which was thoroughly discredited after years of corruption scandals, ineptitude and negligence.

The Detroit politicians demanding “community control”—who Conn and BAMN support—are not opposed to privatization, they only want to control the franchise so they can profit from the destruction of the public schools.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the mass mobilization of teachers, students and the entire working class to defend public education.

The defense of education requires first of all a break with the DFT and the unions. The SEP calls on Detroit teachers to set up rank-and-file committees, independent of the DFT, to unite teachers, students and parents—in the metropolitan Detroit area and throughout the country—to fight school closings, layoffs and budget cuts.

The experience with Obama, Granholm, Bobb and Bing has demonstrated that the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are the political representative of the financial aristocracy. In the New Year, the Obama

administration has pledged to work with the congressional Republicans to escalate the attack on teachers and slash funding to public education and other vitally needed social services. This is how they plan to pay for the extension of tax breaks to the rich, the Wall Street bailout and the continuation of the two wars.

The fight to defend public education in Detroit, no less than the struggle by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra musicians to defend access to music and culture, is a *political* fight over the allocation of society's resources. No one will speak for the working class except the workers themselves. For this to occur, however, the working class must free itself from all of the political institutions of big business, including the Democratic Party and the trade unions, and build a powerful political movement of its own.

A quality public education is a basic social right. Just like all the rights of the working class, however, its is incompatible with a social system—capitalism—that concentrates all of the society's wealth and political power in the hands of the super-rich.

America's financial elite sees the costs associated with education as an unacceptable drain on profit. They reject the democratic principle that every child, regardless of socio-economic background, deserves a high-quality education. Moreover, they see no point, and believe it is downright dangerous, to raise the cultural level and expectations of working class youth, which capitalism can offer no future.

To secure the resources necessary to vastly improve the public schools the grip of the financial elite must be broken by sharply increasing taxes on the wealthy and nationalizing the banks and major industries under the democratic control of working people.

This is the fight for socialism. We urge teachers and all those who want to defend public education to study the program of the SEP and make the decision to join our party.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact