All 5,466 Detroit teachers sent layoff notices

Shannon Jones
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Using dictatorial powers recently granted by the Michigan legislature, Detroit Public Schools Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb ordered layoff notices sent to all 5,466 teachers in the district. Nonrenewal notices also went to 248 DPS administrators.

In a statement posted on the DPS web site Bobb said notices were being sent to every member of the Detroit Federation of Teachers "in anticipation of a workforce reduction to match the district's declining student enrollment." Meanwhile, Bobb said, he planned to use the powers granted to him under the state's revised emergency financial manager law to unilaterally change the collective bargaining agreement with teachers by May 17.

This would enable the district to ignore seniority rights when calling back teachers and to purge the system of more experienced and higher paid instructors. School authorities will also have the means to blacklist more militant teachers.

The effective date of the layoffs is July 29. In a press release the district said it was taking "fiscally responsible" steps to cut its workforce and said the early issuance of the notices allowed "for ample preparation so that the district can assess staffing needs to create a smooth transition for the start of the school year."

A measure signed into law on March 17, Public Act 4, by Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder gives the governor broad powers to appoint emergency financial managers with the authority to fire elected officials, rip up union contracts and even dissolve towns. The law also gives public officials the right to void union contracts. Bobb—who was appointed two years ago by the state's former Democratic governor Jennifer Granholm—said he would make full use of these powers.

The draconian law has already been used to place the city of Benton Harbor under an emergency financial manager, who has stripped elected officials of most powers.

The emergency financial manager law is being used to force through a drastic program of budget cuts and tax increases on retirees by the Snyder administration, including a proposed four percent cut in school funding.

The aim is to place the full burden of the economic crisis created by capitalism on the backs of working people. In Detroit, the schools face plummeting enrollment and a deficit that has grown from $200 million when Bobb took over as emergency financial manager in 2009 to $327 million currently. Enrollment has fallen to 73,000, down from 175,000 in 1997.

The decline in enrollment coincided with devastating fall in the city's population. Detroit has lost 25 percent of its people over the last decade, chiefly driven by downsizing of the US auto industry and the explosion of poverty in the Motor City.

Last month Bobb announced his Renaissance 2012 plan that targets one third of the remaining schools in Detroit for either closure or conversion to charter schools. Bids for charter schools are due by May 2. Seventy organizations turned up at a recent bidders conference for charter school operators.

In carrying out this massive privatization Bobb is implementing an agenda set by the Obama administration with the backing of wealthy financial interests. Bobb currently receives $145,000 annually from the Broad and Kellogg Foundations on top of the $280,000 salary he receives as financial manager. The Broad Foundation is one of the leading foundations promoting school privatization.

At town hall meetings held across the district to discuss the closure and privatization plans Bobb has had to confront hundreds of outraged parents. So high is the level of public anger that Bobb has to be

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accompanied by a contingent of bodyguards whenever he appears in public.

The developments in Michigan are being closely watched by state and local officials across the US and could set a benchmark for new attacks on public education. They follow the massive attacks on teachers and public workers forced through in Wisconsin following the demobilization of mass protests by the unions.

Meanwhile, attacks are escalating against teachers all across the United States. In March the Los Angeles schools sent layoff notices to 7,300 employees. Cleveland schools are laying off 631 teachers with the jobs of support staff also at risk, while Indianapolis schools are axing 271 teachers.

In March the West Bloomfield, Michigan schools imposed a 10 percent pay cut on teachers retroactive to December 1. The teachers are currently working without a contract. Their union had offered a five percent pay cut.

Meanwhile, Detroit's Democratic mayor, David Bing, has indicated he may seek powers from the state to gut the contracts of city workers. He praised the recently enacted emergency legislation saying, "it right-sizes a lot of the obstacles you have to deal with on a day to day basis."

A Detroit teacher contacted by the WSWS explained the impact of the threatened layoffs and contract changes. "Many teachers will be forced to retire or consider retirement. Many teachers will be driven to the financial edge because they are already saddled with a six percent pay cut. For teachers with families it will create intolerable conditions.

"At the same time the reforms they are seeking to implement will drastically undermine working conditions. In many cases teachers will be hired and fired at will. They will be asked as a condition of employment to accept an additional pay cut. It goes without saying that seniority rights will be thrown out the window; not just tenure, but basic job security."

Far from offering any means to fight the threatened layoffs, Detroit Federation of Teachers President Keith Johnson said he understood the need to reduce staffing levels and advised teachers to apply for unemployment benefits. The DFT is currently in negotiations with Bobb over revisions to the contract, meetings that Bobb described as "fruitful."

In 2009 the DFT, in the name of "saving jobs," imposed drastic concessions on teachers, including a $10,000 per teacher forced "loan" to the district, a so-called Termination Incentive Plan, aimed at forcing teachers into retirement. The contract also included cuts to health care and a merit pay scheme.

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