

# Detroit parents and teachers denounce school closings

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Parents, students, teachers and other school employees spoke out against plans to shut down their public schools at a meeting on the northeast side of Detroit Monday afternoon. Last month, the city school district's emergency financial manager announced plans to close seven schools by June and hand over another 45 to privately run charter outfits. If no charter operators are found for 18 of the schools, they too will be closed.

The plan is being coordinated with the Democratic administration of Detroit Mayor Dave Bing, which is moving ahead with its own plans to shut down sections of the city deemed too under-populated and poor to continue servicing.

As speaker after speaker on Monday explained, neighborhood schools provide families not just with education for their children, but also essential nutrition, medical treatment, daycare, assistance with utility payments and other critical resources. As one speaker noted, "Our school is an oasis in a desert. If you close us, the whole area will die." That, in fact, is the plan.

Abeba Mali Cunningham, a young mother, told the WSWs, "There is a clinic at Rutherford Elementary where my children go. One of my children had a heart transplant. We are trying to keep the school open. The clinic is open to the public and kids from other schools get medical care there."

Presiding over the meeting was the district's emergency financial manager, Robert Bobb, who allowed representatives from each school a total of 20 minutes to plead their case to remain open. The spectacle was designed to get schools to compete against each other by proving they were more valuable than the others.

Parents, teachers and administrators spoke passionately during their presentations, making it clear that every school was vital and should remain open. Barbara Houg, a teacher from Carstens, addressed the real reason behind the closings. "I know that the bottom line is business and

money," she said. "But I can't look a child in the eye and say you're just not rich enough to get a quality education." The remarks won loud applause from the more than 100 people in the audience.

"What they are doing is devastating," said Essie McGlothin, a school employee whose children and grandchildren attend local schools. "The teachers know my children, work with them and love them. They always go beyond the call of duty. Bobb is out to make money for himself and his friends—and we are going to be left holding the bag," she told the WSWs.

"When I was 14 years old I marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Alabama. We were beaten. Now they are taking everything, including our pensions from us. We won these things with our blood, sweat and tears and we are going to have to fight for them again."

Since being appointed by former governor Jennifer Granholm, a Democrat, in 2009, Bobb has carried out a scorched earth policy, shutting down scores of schools, privatizing janitorial, transportation and other services, and slashing the jobs and living standards of teachers and other school employees.

Bobb, however, is only the front man for more powerful corporate and political forces. The sell-off of public schools to privately run charter companies is a key policy of the Obama administration. Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan, has called Detroit "ground zero" for so-called school reform, a proving ground for the White House's policies.

In a speech earlier this month, he said school authorities in Detroit needed the courage to follow the model of New Orleans where 75 percent of the children now attend charter schools. "I see the progress here in New Orleans and I ask, 'Why not Detroit?' We don't need to wait for a hurricane before we can reform schools. I even think Detroit can leapfrog New Orleans."

In fact, the man-made disaster in Detroit—the plant

closings and mass unemployment that have led to the loss of one-quarter of the city's population in the last decade alone—is being exploited to dismantle public education and hand schools over to for-profit operations. Declining student enrollment is used as the justification. But this is a self-fulfilling prophecy; the dismantling of neighborhood schools will only drive more students out of the school system.

Last week, layoff notices were sent out to all 5,466 teachers in the Detroit school district. Under a new law signed by Republican governor Rick Snyder, emergency financial managers have dictatorial powers to void collective bargaining agreements, dissolve school boards and other elected bodies, and sell off public assets. Bobb has said he will nullify the labor agreement with teachers next month, enabling him to ignore seniority when choosing which instructors to retain.

Snyder, who is demanding a cut of \$300 per pupil in state aid to school districts, is delivering a major speech on public education today. Among other reactionary proposals, he is expected to outline a plan for schools to compete for scarce resources, the expansion of merit pay for teachers, and the use of online courses to replace classroom instruction.

The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), which has collaborated with Bobb in imposing his reactionary school “reform” measures, responded by saying it understood the need to close schools and lay off teachers. DFT President Keith Johnson, who was at Monday's meeting, remained silent throughout the proceedings.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed a statement [download in PDF] at the event calling on parents, students and school employees to organize action committees, independent of the big business politicians and the unions, to coordinate a fight to stop the school closings and defend public education.

Rose Chambers, an associate teacher at Hutchinson Elementary School, said, “I just watched ‘Spartacus’ last night and saw how the gladiators were forced to fight each other. Bobb is just sitting up there on the stage like Caesar. With a thumb up or down, he says, ‘save them’ or ‘kill them.’”

She continued, “I have kids crying in my class and asking me why they want to close our school down. They ask, ‘Are we a bad school?’ Bobb got on TV and said his Renaissance 2012 plan was going to bring Detroit up. How is that going to happen by closing schools and forcing kids to walk through fields and abandoned houses? Only 20 percent of Detroiters have a car. Our

kids are not garbage. They are not throwaway kids. They are the future.”

Chambers noted the high salaries Bobb is known to have paid his consultants, who also received vouchers to eat at the city's finest restaurants during their work. “They know where they are going to eat, but our kids don't know where they are going to get their next meal. Some of these children don't even have water in their homes. Our school isn't just a building. Everyone from the principal to the janitor believes in these kids. They bring groceries in so the kids can eat. They help in so many ways.”

Another Hutchinson teacher, James Sancricca, said, “I've seen our kids grow against all odds. They come from some of the most impoverished homes. But everyone comes together to help.” Commenting on the fact that school funding was being cut around the country, Sancricca added, “And they are giving the corporations tax cuts but they aren't creating any jobs.”

Referring to Bobb's dictatorial powers, another Hutchinson teacher, Elizabeth Gorney, said, “I grew up in Poland. What is going on here is totalitarianism. The next thing they are going to do is ban public gatherings.”

Dennis, a laid off school security guard, said, “Bobb got rid of 225 of us on July 30, 2010. He gave us a one-day notice. He brought in a private company and paid them six dollars less an hour. Before us it was the school bus drivers.

“Public education is falling apart and the charter schools, which are on the rise, are not as good. If a child needs special education or has a behavioral problem, they get rid of them and keep the state funding. People didn't listen closely when Obama was running. He said he was in favor of charters.

“They say there is no money for schools but they gave billions to the banks. All of these politicians are bought off by big companies and the banks. Bobb and Bing talk about sustaining the city but they are shutting schools. If there was more money put into the schools then people would be coming back.”



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