

Birmingham, Michigan teachers denounce education cuts

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30 June 2011

Teachers in the Detroit suburb of Birmingham, Michigan ratified a new two-year concessions contract Tuesday as school districts across the state are in the midst of imposing a new round of layoffs and pay cuts on teachers and support staff.

The new contract requires teachers to pay 10 percent of total health insurance costs, some \$200 a month for a family, and imposes a new 13-step salary schedule that lengthens the time it takes for teachers to receive pay raises. Teachers will also be required to work an extra day this year and next year with no additional pay.

The teachers' union, the Birmingham Education Association, recommended acceptance of the cuts. BEA President Scott Morrow praised the ratification of the contract, declaring, "I am very glad to have a two-year contract in place."

Already confronting a \$6.6 million deficit in fiscal 2011-2012, Birmingham, like districts across Michigan, faces an additional \$470 per pupil loss in funding under terms of the new state budget recently signed into law by Republican Governor Rick Snyder. The cuts, totaling some \$1 billion, are forcing teacher layoffs, reductions in maintenance and custodial services as well as pay cuts around the state.

Lansing teachers face \$30 million in contract concessions, including pay cuts and increased health insurance premiums. As many as 95 teachers in the district face layoff.

In the Detroit suburb of Utica, teachers just approved a one-year contract that will force them to pay 20 percent toward the cost of health care premiums. Combined with cuts surrendered last year, Utica teachers have given up nearly \$9.2 million in concessions. Meanwhile, teachers in Brighton face demands for a 15 percent across-the-board reduction in salary and benefits.

Teachers in Detroit, the state's largest school district, face demands for an additional ten percent pay cut.

Emergency Financial Manager Roy Roberts is also threatening to cut another 853 jobs. The cuts are part of a wholesale assault on public education in Detroit including the closure or conversion into charters of dozens of schools.

The Snyder administration is currently attempting to pass legislation under the guise of "tenure reform" sharply eroding the protection of teachers against unfair dismissal.

The two major teacher unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have worked hand in hand with the Snyder administration in imposing the full weight of the budget crisis on the backs of teachers and students.

The NEA-affiliated Michigan Education Association, in fact, is proposing its own "tenure reform" legislation, containing a somewhat modified version of the anti-worker provisions contained in the Republican sponsored "tenure reform" bill.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Birmingham teachers Tuesday outside an informational meeting called by the union to discuss contract concessions. Teachers in Birmingham, one of the wealthier school districts in Michigan, find themselves confronting attacks on jobs and pay alongside teachers and support staff in poorer districts.

A new teacher at the Birmingham schools, who as been an educator for nine years, said, "You don't go into teaching to become a millionaire. We know that we are going to be working summers and weekends. But at least we should get thanks for it. Instead all we are getting is disrespect from all sides.

"I don't mind being observed in the classroom to help me teach better. But the suits in Washington, DC, and Lansing don't know what they are talking about or what teachers face. We can't fix society and broken homes but we are being scapegoated for these problems.

“Are they only worried about the bottom line—money?”

“I’m blessed to be working in Birmingham. It has more resources than Southfield or Detroit. I used to think a one-room schoolhouse was quaint and the way to go. But you can see the benefit of having enough money to provide students with the resources and atmosphere they need.

“Public schools are supposed to be the reset button to help kids overcome difficult lives. They used to be the great equalizer. But not anymore.”

Ann Coles, a middle school science teacher said, “I believe that public money should go equally to all children regardless of ability. I have a problem with using public money to fund schools that are making a profit. It seems the wealthy can always afford private education for their children while the inner cities are struggling. I don’t see how that can be called OK.

“Look at the tuition increases in the colleges. My daughter goes to the University of Michigan. My husband and I are both teachers and we can hardly afford to send her to a good school. Some people can’t afford to send their children to college at all.”

Coles criticized Obama’s Race to the Top program with its promotion of charter schools and merit pay. “Education should not be based on a business model,” she said. “Education used to be the ticket in our nation for everyone to be on an even playing field. And it feels a bit like we are going backward on that. We are trying to attract people who don’t want to aim higher for our next generation.

“I don’t think we will evolve as a human race until every child is at the top.”

A Birmingham elementary teacher said, “It is the whole state. There are state initiatives being handed out to everybody

“There are only so many places they can cut. You are either going to have increased class sizes or they are going to take some of the extra things that are part of a good, well-rounded education, like art and music. At the high schools they might lose some of the special classes they offer. It will affect the whole educational program.

“You want to provide money for the students who are struggling, you want to provide them with more education dollars. You don’t want to take money away from them. It isn’t just as easy as having teachers work harder to get those test scores up. It just doesn’t work that way. You are dealing with children. There are all kinds of things that are beyond a teacher’s control that contribute to whether they learn slowly or they struggle learning. You can’t just say make teachers work harder, give them merit

pay and then all the scores will come up.

“I’ve worked for 35 years with kids and I can tell you it doesn’t work that way.

“The whole thing about tenure is ridiculous. They can already get rid of teachers that are not performing, but you have to have a reason. If you can fire at will, it means they will look at teachers who are higher in salary and say ‘we can get rid of a teacher we are paying \$80,000 and hire two \$40,000-a-year teachers without any experience.’ They don’t care.

“With some of the things we are doing, I think we will ruin the educational system for years to come. Once the politicians figure out what they have done, they will not be able to turn it around quickly.”

Another teacher said, “This is the worst I’ve seen it in 22 years of teaching. The business model will not work in the schools. We are not putting out products like tires, but kids. Some of these children are coming from broken homes and some get no breakfast. Yet, the government is holding us up to an impossible standard. It would be better to pass laws to make sure every kid can have breakfast in the morning.

“Governor Snyder is giving tax breaks to big business. He is a businessman and once he gets out of office he is going back to business. So, in effect, he is giving himself a tax break. At the same time he wants to take away tenure and establish merit pay to base our pay on test scores. The private school in Ann Arbor where the governor sends his kids spends more than \$20,000 on each child and they just held a fundraiser because they said they needed even more to provide a proper education. At the same time, the governor wants your kid to make it on \$6,000 a year.

“Don’t get me going on (US Secretary of Education) Arne Duncan, he’s the same. It started with Bush’s No Child Left Behind and has continued with Obama. Public schools are not for profit. Charters schools make money. The government is abdicating its responsibility to provide public education.”



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