

SEP/ISSE holds meeting to oppose closure of Catherine Ferguson Academy

Shannon Jones**16 June 2011**

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Students for Social Equality held a public meeting June 14 in Detroit to oppose the impending closure of the Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit. The school, which provides quality education to pregnant teenagers and young mothers, has been targeted by Detroit Public Schools Emergency Financial Manager Roy Roberts as part of plans to close or convert to charters dozens of public schools in the city.

The meeting was attended by a cross section of workers, students and professionals from Detroit and the surrounding suburban area, including a number of supporters of the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS).

Lawrence Porter, chairman of CAUS and assistant national secretary of the SEP chaired the meeting.

Ed, a teacher in Detroit and a supporter of the SEP, placed the attack on the Catherine Ferguson Academy in the context of the overall assault being waged on public education in the United States and internationally.

He noted that within the Detroit Public Schools enrollment had plummeted catastrophically, falling from 180,000 in 1996 to less than 70,000 today. At the same time the teaching staff declined from over 12,000 to currently under 5,000.

He explained the role of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, which has served as the chief obstacle to the mobilization of teachers against this ongoing assault. To illustrate the subservience of the DFT to the corporate establishment he noted that the DFT had recently accepted several million dollars from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which promotes private, for-profit charter schools. He further noted that Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers receives annual salary and benefits of close to \$600,000.

Joe Kishore, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party, gave the main report. He took up the claim by the corporate establishment that there was “no money” to fund the continued operation of the Catherine Ferguson Academy. To illustrate the staggering levels of social inequality in America he pointed out that Ford CEO Alan Mulally took home \$83 million last year alone, 30 times the annual budget of Catherine Ferguson. He further noted that the 10 richest men in Michigan had a net wealth of \$21.1 billion, 7,850 times the annual budget of Catherine Ferguson.

Kishore pointed to the broader political context in which the attack on education in Detroit is taking place. He stressed that all workers, not just black workers in Detroit, faced the same basic attacks.

He explained that the experience since the election of Barack Obama had disproven the claims of all those who said that the election of the first African American president would lead to an improvement in the lives of working people.

“What has happened? The bank bailouts have continued. The wars have been expanded. In his restructuring of the auto industry, Obama insisted that auto workers give up huge cuts in pay and benefits. The federal government stands idly by, doing nothing amidst conditions of mass unemployment and unprecedented social distress.

“As for public education, Obama has praised the actions of former Detroit Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb, with his Education Secretary Arne Duncan declaring Detroit ‘ground zero’ in the fight to introduce reforms attacking teachers and expanding charter schools.”

After discussing the history of public education in the US, Kishore stressed that its defense was fundamentally a class question that required the mobilization of the entire working class in opposition to the Democratic Party and the trade unions. The defense of public education had to be based on the establishment of socialism, a society based on social need, and not private profit.

A prolonged and lively discussion followed the presentation by the main speakers.

A social studies teacher at Catherine Ferguson read a letter by Ikeeah Dozier, a student at the school, explaining its importance.

“Catherine Ferguson is not only for the continuing education of young mothers, but for the beginning education of our children. We don’t have day care here; we have early education classrooms....

“Why break up this school when it has everything that we need? We are learning, our children are learning, and should something happen, only a flight of stairs, or a short walk down the hallways separates us....

“By closing Catherine Ferguson, you are not only closing us out, but our children. It’s as if you’re saying that because we made a mistake, neither we nor our children deserve an education.”

Mark, a Detroit worker and supporter of CAUS said, “Catherine Ferguson is only one symptom of the problem. Even if Catherine Ferguson remains open, which I hope it does, we have not solved what is going on.

“This is capitalism. The question is profit. If there were a profit in keeping Catherine Ferguson open, we wouldn’t be here now. The issue is the working class fighting against the capitalist system for equality. We have many wars, attacks on education, utility shutoffs, and the deaths of children. Our goal is to change the system.”

A supporter of the group BAMN (“By Any Means Necessary”) spoke in the discussion to promote a protest the group has called at the school. SEP supporters explained their opposition to the political basis on which the protest is being organized, which is oriented to appeals to the Democratic Party establishment in Detroit on the basis of identity politics and the promotion of affirmative action.

Jerome White, a long time SEP member, said, “If one begins by saying this is a race question, it means they are not really oriented to the working class but they are oriented to sections of the black political establishment in

this city. We are living in a city where racial politics produced a disaster for the working class.

“The question is: are we trying to get the ear of members of the city council or the news media to give us publicity because a number of young people get arrested at a protest? That will accomplish nothing. We are not trying to convince the powers that be.

“We are the only movement that can defend public education, because we are not tied to the Democratic Party or the trade unions, which are destroying education. This meeting is to lay the basis for establishing an independent committee of teachers, students and parents to defend public education.”

Speaking on the question of affirmative action, a Catherine Ferguson teacher explained that racial preferences in university admissions and hiring had only benefitted a tiny layer of African Americans, while sowing divisions between white and black workers. She pointed to the attacks being waged on working people by African American politicians such as Detroit millionaire Mayor Detroit Mayor David Bing and President Obama as examples of the outcome of the policies of affirmative action.

In closing the meeting, Kishore emphasized that the defense of public education was fundamentally a political question. There are many organizations that work deliberately to subordinate the working class to the Democratic Party, and thereby facilitate the assault on workers, he said. The coming period would see an enormous upsurge in the class struggle. The task was to build an independent political movement, based on a socialist perspective. “If workers are not conscious of the fact they are fighting the capitalist system, their struggles will be defeated.”



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