

Michigan teachers rally against school cuts

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On Tuesday, June 7, thousands of teachers throughout the state of Michigan held informational pickets and protests against the school cuts by Republican Governor Rick Snyder and the Republican-dominated legislature.

More than \$1 billion has been cut for public education funding that will lead to teacher layoffs, cuts to maintenance and custodial services, increased classroom sizes and a drastic reduction in the quality of education. The cuts include a cut of \$470 per pupil in K-12 schools, although that figure will be less for districts that approve of other restrictions.

Funding for public universities and community colleges were also slashed. The state university system was cut by 15 percent and community colleges by more than \$216 million.

Snyder, the multi-millionaire former CEO of Gateway Computers, also signed legislation giving \$1.8 billion in tax breaks to businesses. The measure is to be paid for by ending a tax break on the pensions of retirees and cutting the earned income credit program that helped the working poor.

Tuesday's "Day of Action" was called by the Michigan Education Association (MEA) in response to the growing anger among teachers and the public against the drastic cuts passed in May.

The MEA is affiliated with the National Education Association (NEA), the largest teacher union and one of the largest unions in the country with 3.2 million members. The NEA and MEA are major backers of the Democratic Party and noticeably said nothing about similar attacks by Democrats who are also cutting school funding. In Michigan the MEA represents most of the school districts in the state, especially in the suburban and rural areas, with Detroit and several nearby districts affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers.

Rather than carrying out a real mobilization of the working class against the counter-revolution now underway against all social programs won by the working class, the aim of these campaigns is to find ways to let off steam and direct the opposition into safe political channels.

In the leaflet that the MEA produced to hand out to parents the union made what could only be described as a toothless

appeal to contact the governor and state legislators to oppose what they imply are "Republican cuts." In reality, these cuts are being made all over the country by both Democratic and Republican legislatures. In New York and California, where the Democrats control the governorship and the state legislatures, the cuts are just as draconian.

Throughout Michigan, the cuts will be devastating to whole communities. Not only has the per-student funding been cut for the schools, but also the formula used to fund higher education and special education programs has been changed. To assist the cuts, legislatures lumped the funding for colleges together with K-12 education. This decision served two purposes; it removed college financing from the state's general fund where it was cut, but it also created a savings that was used to help offset the tax break that went to businesses.

Based on the smaller per-student funding, each school district will have to decide which programs to keep and where to cut, placing schools in an untenable position.

Several examples of pending cuts include:

- In Ferndale, the district faces \$2 million in cuts. The district plans to lay off 63 of the 225 teachers in the district. Class sizes are expected to grow dramatically.

- Wayne-Westland will lose \$8.9 million in funding, or \$713 per student.

- In the Plymouth-Canton School District, \$18 million will be cut from a budget of \$163 million. Measures under consideration include the permanent firing of at least 80 teachers and 20 or more janitorial staff, canceling bus routes, increasing class sizes, and closing at least one school.

- Fenton, which has a deficit of \$2.8 million, will eliminate 15 teaching positions and raise class size to 36-40 for students in the elementary school level.

- The Kalamazoo school district will lose 48 positions, including 20 teaching slots, to cut \$7 million.

- Grand Rapids plans to cut \$22 million from the schools and 40 teacher positions.

- Under the governor's policy, Ecorse, Benton Harbor and Detroit have emergency finance managers who can rip up contracts and impose cuts unilaterally. In Detroit, the emergency finance manager has delayed the announcement

of the school closures with the exception of five schools. Four are elementary schools. The fifth is the renowned Catherine Ferguson Academy, a special school for girls with children that has won national awards for its innovation.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to teachers demonstrating in Ferndale, Michigan, on their reasons for participating in the protest.

Nick Zajas, who teaches social studies, said, “We are here to defend public education as opposed to charter schools. It’s pretty clear that this is especially the policy of this governor and the Republican legislatures.”

When he was asked about the policies of the Obama administration, which has promoted the “Race to the Top” program mandating charter schools, Zajas said there are policies of the Department of Education he supports and some he doesn’t.

“I do not agree with the promotion of charter schools,” stated Zajas. “They are not required to take students who have special needs, but public schools do. I do not agree with that.”

On a state level, Zajas said he was opposed to the Snyder government reducing per-student funding and the policies of privatization. “They are privatizing custodians, cafeteria workers, maintenance, even the clerical workers.”

“Public education is under attack in this country,” continued Zajas. “Here in Michigan, they are talking about increasing the class size to as high as 45.”

Johnny Borg is a phys-ed teacher at Ferndale High School and a former auto worker at American Axle. He said he was there to make people aware of what was taking place in the schools.

“They are pushing people [teachers] out of the schools,” stated Borg. “They are cutting all of the wages and benefits.”

Walter Rakovsky, a Spanish language teacher who has been teaching for 39 years, was outraged at the cuts.

“I think the attack on education is an organized, coordinated attack by the right-wing,” stated Rakovsky. “The state legislature is tied up with ALEC, the American Legislative Exchange Council. It is tied up with the Koch brothers. They have an agenda that is the same in each state, which is basically to eliminate public education. They call for smaller governments. They also are opposed to decent paying jobs for minorities.

“This government is like Reagan on steroids. Everything is cut.”

On whether the election of Obama made a difference,

Rakovsky said, “I ask you, what has he done? I don’t see it.”

Leonard Hunter, an economics teacher at Ferndale High School, said there is a national campaign to make teachers the scapegoats. “You can see it in the news all over the country. And now they are continuously calling for cuts in health care.”

“The assault really began in 1994,” stated Hunter. “The state under Engler [former Republican governor] changed the funding for education. The Headlee amendment was passed that said taxes for education would not go up more than 5 percent. People bought it, and after that they began changing the funding mechanism for education. It’s been a mess since then.”

This rally was one of several organized by the MEA against the new laws being pushed through the government. The sizeable turnout is an indication of the rising anger felt by workers as the real impact of the cuts become clear.

Despite the opposition to the cuts, in early May the NEA became the first and largest union in the country to announce its endorsement of President Obama for president in 2012. Obama’s support for merit pay, charter schools and the scapegoating of teachers in Central Falls, Rhode Island, didn’t prevent their early endorsement.

In 2010, NEA President Dennis Van Roekel told the *New York Times*, “This is not the change I hoped for.... Today our members face the most anti-educator, anti-student environment I have ever experienced.”

What changed?

Roekel simply says he can work better with the Democrats than he can with the Republicans. The truth is that both parties are based on the needs of the corporate and financial elite.

For a genuine fight against the cuts in the schools, the WSWs calls for a break with both parties and the building of independent rank-and-file committees to unite teachers, students, parents and workers in the fight for socialist policies.



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