Michigan Education Association complicit in passage of anti-teacher law

Charles Bogle
27 July 2011

Michigan House bills 4625-4628, which recently passed the state Senate and were signed into law by Republican Governor Rick Snyder, will gut tenure rights for public school teachers and college instructors and severely limit collective bargaining. The measure is one of the latest attacks on teachers and public education being encouraged by the Obama administration nationally.

The Michigan Education Association (MEA), an affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA), did nothing to oppose this attack. On the contrary, the state's largest public employee union betrayed its 160,000 members' interests and was complicit in the further dismantling of public education.

Bills 4625-4628—which will be implemented in 2012—will extend the probationary period for non-tenured instructors from four years to five and change the acceptable reasons for disciplining and discharging instructors from "reasonable and just cause" to any reasons that are not "capricious and arbitrary." Seniority, i.e., the practice of "last hired, first fired," will be eliminated as the determinant for deciding the order of teacher layoffs.

Student growth and assessment data will account for an increasing portion of instructor evaluation, from 25 percent in academic year 2013-14 to 49% in 2015-16. Finally, faculty will lose the right to collectively bargain crucial issues including merit pay, teacher evaluation and job placement, and discipline or discharge of employees.

Throughout the state, school districts are wiping out the jobs of thousands of teachers in order to balance deficits worsened by Snyder's budget cuts and tax breaks for big business. In Detroit, the governor has given an emergency financial manager the power to tear up union contracts, unilaterally close schools and fire staff, and sell off public schools to private charter operators.

Instead of rejecting the bills out of hand, the MEA first misled its members into believing the union might organize job actions, including strikes, to alter the legislation. In April of 2011, the union sent e-mails to its members asking them to vote on the use of job actions, including strikes, as negotiating tools.

This was nothing but empty posturing. Alex, an assistant professor at Monroe County Community College, told the WSWS when an MEA representative visited the local union branch to answer questions about possible job actions, he assured a questioner that the MEA would never call a strike.

Then, after bills 4625-4628 were brought to the House floor, MEA officials announced their support for an alternative reform bill (Senate Bill 503) introduced by Republican Senator Roger Kahn. This bill did little more than assure the MEA would have a continued presence at the negotiating table in order to sell out it members.

Specifically, under SB503, tenure decisions would have been made through arbitration rather than through the Michigan Tenure Commission. Following the pattern of grievance arbitrations, the Michigan Employment Relations Commission would have been charged with selecting an arbitrator, conducting a hearing, and rendering a decision within 150 days.

When SB503 was rejected in favor of the original anti-tenure and anti-collective bargaining on June 30, the MEA then announced its support for a recall campaign aimed at several Republican legislators and Governor Rick Snyder. "The union is focusing money and some volunteers to help the recall effort in selected districts where we have the highest likelihood of success," a union official told the *Detroit Free Press.*

© World Socialist Web Site

This follows the well-worn and cynical pattern first established by the Wisconsin Education Association Council after it helped demobilize and betray the wave of mass protests and teacher job actions against Governor Scott Walker's attack on public employees earlier this year. The recall campaigns are aimed at blocking any serious struggle against the bipartisan attack on public education and promoting the election prospects of the Democrats.

The support for the Democrats has nothing to do with defending teachers. From Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan to the Democrats in New York, California, Connecticut and other states, the Democrats have carried out just as vicious attacks against teachers and public education as their Republican counterparts. The difference is the Democrats have more regularly used the services of the NEA and American Federation of Teachers to accomplish these aims.

In Michigan, the Republican governor has chosen the road of collaboration with the teachers' unions rather than seeking to destroy them. By supporting the gutting of tenure and the gutting of collective bargaining rights, the MEA is signaling its willingness to work with Snyder—despite the howling about recalls—in order to protect the institutional interests of the labor apparatus and its dues income.

Compulsory arbitration means an agreement will be imposed upon teachers when an impasse is reached underscoring the farcical character of the whole process of contract "negotiations."

Four days after bills 4625-4628 passed through the Michigan legislature and shortly before Governor Snyder signed the bills into law, the NEA capped its Annual Meeting and Representative Assembly by becoming the first major union to endorse President Barack Obama for reelection in 2012.

In making this announcement, the NEA made it clear that it endorses the Obama administration's attack on teachers and goal of privatizing public education as long as it has the opportunity to be a partner in this crime and collect the spoils.

wsws.org/contact

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

© World Socialist Web Site