

Detroit teachers rally against attack on public education

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On Tuesday, more than 500 teachers and support staff demonstrated at the Detroit Public Schools headquarters to protest the draconian wage and benefits cuts recently imposed by Emergency Financial Manager Roy Roberts.

Roberts is a former General Motors manager who succeeded EFM Robert Bobb, who had been appointed by the then Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm in 2009. Under Bobb's tenure, scores of schools were shuttered and thousands of schools employees' jobs eliminated. Roberts, for his part, has wasted no time in exercising his dictatorial powers to impose a new round of attacks on teachers.

The latest cuts include an across-the-board 10 percent pay reduction for all school employees. In addition, teachers will pay more for medical care, amounting to 20 percent of the cost for coverage. For most Detroit teachers, the reduction in wages, amplified by the increased medical deductions, will exceed \$7,000 for the year, and be as high as \$10,000 for some teachers. This constitutes a devastating decline in the living standards of teachers, especially those who have families and children to support.

Roberts has also instituted a freeze on pay steps for teachers, in effect establishing a multi-tier pay system for the foreseeable future, and a certain discouragement for new and younger teachers to apply in the district. Finally, Roberts has imposed a suspension of payments for accumulated sick days at retirement. With many veteran teachers having garnered hundreds of sick days over the years, the choice will be to seek an early retirement, or use up their sick days during the school year.

The cuts imposed by Roberts are drastic, and trample on the democratic rights of teachers, who are being victimized for a decades-long crisis created by chronic

underfunding. Teachers perform one of society's most important functions, and yet politicians from both parties and the media denounce teachers for being overpaid and responsible for failing schools.

Detroit teachers routinely spend huge sums of their own money to insure that their students have the supplies they need. One teacher told the local media covering the demonstration that she spends between \$3,000 and \$4,000 a year on supplies, which if tabulated over her 19-year career in the district she has spent more than \$40,000, a staggering sum.

Another DPS employee, a schools secretary, remarked that she now makes what amounts to a "poverty wage." "We make so little now, we can apply for food stamps," she told the WSWWS.

Tuesday's demonstration, called by the Detroit Federation of Teachers, was an attempt to blow off some steam. The DFT is seeking to posture as an organization waging a fight against Roberts. "We want to let him (Roberts) know that you've got about 10,000 disgruntled employees," DFT President Keith Johnson remarked.

This is no doubt true. However, the aim of the union is to contain this opposition and prevent it from taking on an independent organizational and political form. All the DFT can propose is a futile lawsuit, an appeal to the courts, one of the very institutions that has upheld the EFM model, and a plaintive plea for joint discussions with Roberts. DFT President Johnson recently appealed for Roberts and the union to "come together as partners around a meeting table." In other words, the union would like to be a partner in enforcing concessions on the teachers.

At the same time, the DFT is pushing an initiative to recall Michigan Governor Rick Snyder and a referendum against Public Act 4, passed by the

Michigan state legislature. The act codified the imposition of EFMs to make the necessary budget cuts, slashing jobs and services in school district and municipalities.

The DFT has collaborated with the school district for years in imposing concessions on teachers. It has done nothing to oppose either the closure of dozens of schools or the unfettered spread of inferior for-profit charter schools that siphon off both students and money from the district. In fact, the union already agreed to a pay cut, the so-called Termination Incentive Plan or TIP, as part of the 2009 contract Roberts is currently ripping up.

Earlier this summer, Obama's education Secretary Arne Duncan glowingly approved the plans by Michigan Governor Snyder and Roberts to further dismember the DPS by creating a new district for so-called "failed" schools, i.e., schools embedded in the poorest neighborhoods with unemployment approaching 50 percent.

The right-wing policies of the Obama administration have not deterred the DFT's parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, along with the National Education Association, the other major teachers union, from being among the first to endorse Obama for re-election. This, in spite of the fact that his Race to the Top education initiative has been the spearhead for the non-stop scapegoating of teachers for the crisis of public education.

The Socialist Equality Party distributed a leaflet to teachers that explained the following: "The attack on teachers is one component of the attack on public education as whole. A fight against this attack requires a new organizational and political strategy.

"It is necessary first of all to break with the Detroit Federation of Teachers and build independent organizations of working class struggle.... The role of the DFT is not unique. The AFL-CIO unions, whose leaders often take in six figure salaries plus perks, have become the junior partners in the assault on wages, benefits, work rules and the job security of working people.

"A successful struggle to defend public education depends centrally on the independent struggle and political mobilization of the working class. The Socialist Equality Party is spearheading this fight."



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