

Commissioners vote to close four Detroit branch libraries

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The Detroit Library Commission voted Tuesday to close four branch libraries in the city after more than two months of protests. The four set to be shuttered are Monteith, Mark Twain Annex and Lincoln on the eastside of Detroit and Richard on the westside.

At a previous meeting held on October 18 the commission deadlocked over the proposed closures in the face of angry public opposition. The October 18 meeting drew a standing room-only crowd.

The commission says the library closures are necessitated by a severe staff shortage. Earlier in the year, the commission laid off 82 staff members as a cost cutting move. In September, the board announced plans to close six branches, the four now slated to close in addition to the Chase and Chandler Park branches. Residents of both westside and eastside Detroit neighborhoods staged a series of protests over the proposed cuts. The commission then revised its proposal, slating four libraries for closure rather than six.

In calling for the adoption of the proposed closures one board member warned that the shutting down of the four libraries was only the beginning. Pointing to the reported deficit facing the city of Detroit he predicted more libraries would have to be closed over the course of the next year.

The Tuesday commission hearing saw a considerably lower turnout than the October 18 meeting. This was no doubt in part due to lack of publicity and the fact that a meeting the previous week called to discuss the proposed closures had been cancelled. In any event, the lower attendance undoubtedly emboldened the commission to proceed with the vote on the cuts.

Playing a cynical and duplicitous role in attempting to divert opposition to the closures were local area Democratic politicians, including Congressmen John

Conyers and Hansen Clarke from Detroit. Both Conyers and Clarke sent representatives to the library commission hearing, who postured as opponents of the cuts. In fact all the levers of power in Detroit, the city council, the mayor's office, as well as the school board which appoints the library commission, are controlled by the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party bears full responsibility for the social disaster inflicted on the working class in Detroit, presiding over the wholesale decimation of jobs, schools and city services.

While supporting the closures, Jonathan Kinloch, vice president of the library commission, reacted hostilely to the posturing of Conyers and Clarke as defenders of public libraries. He pointed out that the Obama administration had specifically excluded money for public libraries in its recent stimulus proposals. "These cuts are from the top all the way down. Obama opposed funding for libraries in his stimulus plan. How does a member of US Congress claim he is not aware of the plight of public libraries? They have the ability to put forward bills to change the funding for the libraries. These people continue to come and play games with our emotions."

The unions have played a particularly treacherous role in the fight against the library closures. Todd Kelly, president of AFSCME Local 1259, the bargaining agent for library staff, supported the closures. In a recent exchange with the *World Socialist Web Site*, Kelly denounced those opposing the shutdown of the libraries as "uninformed local activists." (See, "An exchange with a local union president on the Detroit library closures")

In voting to go ahead with the closures, the library commission disregarded the testimony of city residents who stressed the importance of the libraries for the community. In recent years Detroit residents have faced

scores of school closures under conditions where residents of the city suffer one of the highest illiteracy rates in the country.

Many Detroit residents gave moving testimony on the importance of the libraries.

Jessica Howell, a former teacher, said, “I am a supporter of our community’s libraries. In particular I speak for the senior citizens of our community; we have been dependent upon the availability of the services that are provided through the library that is accessible and has a trained staff that is accommodating.

“I visit the library about three days a week. There are always people in the library. We believe that there are many problems to be solved in the city. There is a very diverse need to address so many areas. Education and reading are a foundation for many things needed to ensure a child have any type of quality of life.”

A supporter of the Lincoln library said, “I walk there. When I get to the Lincoln library it is not just a learning environment. I like the staff there too. They care about those who go there, both the adults and children.”

Pastor Terry Robinson from the Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church in Detroit spoke in support of the Mark Twain Annex. He said, “It seems as if the libraries have been pitted against one another. We would like to see all the libraries stay open. We make a specific appeal to keep the Mark Twain Annex open.

“It is essential that the problem of literacy be addressed. Our children are constantly hindered in their achievement. To have our public school system be destroyed at the same time as our libraries is a travesty.”

Among those addressing the meeting was Jared Davis, principal of Finney High School on the eastside of Detroit. He said, “The key to a successful lifestyle is a quality education. And the key to a quality education is being able to read. It is the foundation for all learning.

“It is upsetting that the only community resource that supports education is being closed. We talk about Detroit making a comeback, but closing a library is upsetting. We ask you to consider leaving the libraries alone.”

Reacting to the closure, eastside Detroit resident Franklin Clements told the WSWS, “I think it is a raw deal all the way around. They are betraying the trust of

the public.

“They are disenfranchising everyone; the people who have the least money and clout. That’s bad news for the community. They are bulldozing us. The big ones are taking advantage of the little ones.”

Mylika, a westside parent said, “It will hurt the children as well as the parents. My children go to the library to work on the school reports they have.

“I feel it is unfair to the public, period. I feel if they really want money for these libraries they can get the money, because they always find money for other things that they want. It is not in their interest to save these libraries they want to close. Myself, I think they want to use that money for other things.”



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