

Highland Park Michigan school district faces closure threat

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Michigan Governor Rick Snyder is threatening to force the closure of the entire Highland Park, Michigan school district in response to a cash shortage that has left the district unable to make payroll this week.

The announcement follows the suspension of the emergency manager (EM) appointed by Snyder to run the district. A judge suspended Jack Martin after a lawsuit filed by a Highland Park school board member who said his appointment violated the state's open meeting law.

The school district is reportedly \$150,000 short of the cash needed to make payroll this Friday. The district ended the 2011 school year with a cumulative \$11.3 million deficit. Enrollment has dropped sharply following wave after wave of school closings and budget cuts, falling from 3,179 in 2006 to less than one thousand currently.

Snyder says the state will likely not make further emergency loans to keep Highland Park schools open. Instead, the governor raised the possibility of contracting with another district to operate the schools for the rest of the year, or contracting with a charter school operator. The governor indicated he would quickly reappoint Martin as EM as soon as the review panel that recommended him for the post holds another meeting in compliance with state open meeting requirements.

In late January Martin ordered the closure of Barber Focus School for grades K-12, one of three schools remaining in Highland Park, and its merger with Henry Ford Academy. The announcement came within hours of Martin's appointment as emergency manager and provoked widespread outrage among parents and staff.

The attack on public education in Highland Park is part of an effort by both Democrats and Republicans to force the economic crisis onto the backs of working

people by slashing jobs, wages and social services. The threat to close the Highland Park Schools follows within days the announcement of Detroit Public Schools Emergency Manager Roy Roberts that 16 school buildings will be closed this fall. A succession of state appointed emergency managers at the Detroit Public Schools have shuttered scores of buildings and imposed massive concessions on teachers, including a 10 percent pay cut last fall.

Jack Martin is himself on the financial review team appointed by Governor Snyder to consider a possible state takeover of the finances of the city of Detroit. Martin, an African American, is part of Detroit's business elite and a proponent of for-profit charter schools. In 2002 President Bush named him chief financial officer of the US Department of Education (DOE). He later left the DOE to become the CFO of White Hat management, an operator of charter schools noted for its unscrupulous practices. Currently Martin serves on the board of directors of Knowledge Investment Partners, a hedge fund management company that specializes in the education sector. (see: "Who Is Jack Martin?")

Michigan's Public Act 4 law, giving expanded powers to emergency managers, is thoroughly undemocratic. It gives EMs the right to void union contracts, impose budget cuts and sell city assets. At the same time, the Democratic Party establishment and the trade union bureaucracy in Michigan are posing as opponents of the EM law to make it appear that they are defending the interests of working people. However, their main argument is that drastic cuts on the working class can be imposed through the existing city political establishment.

Typical of this posturing was a panel discussion on the emergency manager law Tuesday in Highland Park,

convened by Michigan Democratic Congressman John Conyers. The meeting, which drew few working class residents of the city, brought together leading figures in the Democratic Party establishment in the Detroit area. This included Congressmen Gary Peters and Hansen Clarke, Detroit City Council member JoAnne Watson, Detroit Federation of Teachers President Keith Johnson and American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 25 president Al Garrettt.

Several legal experts testified that the Michigan emergency manager law was unconstitutional because it violated the commerce clause of the US constitution in relation to contracts. Jocelyn Benson, a professor at the Wayne State Law School, testified that the EM law might also be in violation of the voting rights act because it was disproportionately affecting minority voters in Michigan.

Whatever the merits of the legal arguments advanced, Conyers and other Democrats are covering for the fact that the emergency manager law in its initial form was enacted under Democratic Party administrations. In fact, Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm appointed the majority of emergency managers currently operating in Michigan.

Meanwhile, union officials like Johnson and Garrettt, while denouncing the emergency manager law, are themselves involved in imposing concessions on their members. Johnson in fact boasted that he oversaw givebacks by teachers in 2009 amounting to \$120 million. For his part, Garrett is overseeing concession talks with the city of Detroit aimed at extracting more than \$100 million from city workers.

In his remarks, Congressman Gary Peters articulated the real content of the Democrats' opposition to the emergency manager law, which is to work instead through the trade union bureaucracy to impose cuts. "The labor unions are willing to make sacrifices," Peters said, referring to the massive concessions handed over by the United Auto Workers in 2009 as part of the Obama administration's forced bankruptcy and restructuring of General Motors and Chrysler. "The auto workers stepped forward, now GM is making record profits," he continued.

A number of the panelists, such as Reverend Anthony Bullock of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition in Detroit, attempted to present the emergency manager law in

racial terms in order to obscure the class issues. "We will not be consigned to second class citizenship," said Bullock. However, Bullock and other black Democrats are part of an affluent minority who have benefited from programs like affirmative action, while the vast majority of African American residents in Detroit and Highland Park struggle in poverty or near poverty.

The only proposal advanced at the panel discussion was to support the petition drive, backed by the unions, seeking a referendum to repeal the law. The campaign is in its final stages, currently totaling more than 200,000 signatures that will be delivered to the secretary of state's office in Lansing on February 29 for certification. However, even if signatures are validated and the EM law is suspended, Governor Snyder has indicated he will rely on the previous emergency manager act, which is nearly as onerous.

The enormous opposition in the working class to the cuts being carried out in Highland Park and cities across Michigan can find no genuine expression in the Democratic Party or the unions. The fight against the cuts requires the building of new organizations and the development of an independent political movement of the working class.



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