

Redford, Michigan schools support staff oppose privatization

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On Monday night close to two hundred people packed a school board meeting in Redford Township, Michigan to protest plans to privatize school bus, custodial and maintenance services in the district. Prior to the meeting support staff and their supporters held a spirited picket outside school board headquarters on Beech Daly Road, attracting support from passing motorists.

Officials in the small district, which adjoins Detroit on the west, have issued layoff notices to support staff effective June 30 and are taking bids from private companies. A total of 46 jobs are being targeted. The support staff are members of the Redford Union Custodians and Bus Drivers Association, which is affiliated with the Michigan Education Association.

At the board meeting Greg McIntyre, Assistant Superintendent of Business Services for the Redford Union Schools, gave the main financial report. He noted that the district's finances have been impacted by reductions in state aid and declining enrollment. The district expects to end the year with a \$790,000 deficit, which could rise without raising further revenue or implementing cuts.

McIntyre warned that the district's mounting deficit could lead to a state takeover, noting that a state appointed Emergency Manager is currently in control of the schools in neighboring Detroit as well as Highland Park and Muskegon Heights. Legislation enacted by the state legislature last year gave expanded powers to emergency managers to void union contracts and impose cuts.

Following round after round of reductions in state aid, 48 school districts in Michigan are currently in a deficit position. That compares to 28 in 2009.

McIntyre presented a proposal for a \$25,000 advertising campaign to "defend our turf" against what he described as the loss of students to other schools and charters.

The public comment period of the meeting was dominated by opposition to privatization. The first one to speak was Gary Sund, a parent, who strongly urged the board not to terminate the drivers and school support staff. The audience, consisting of parents, students and staff applauded his remarks when he returned to his seat.

Several representatives of the Michigan Education Association (MEA) spoke in the discussion. None of them pointed out the experiences of other school districts, many of whom had already privatized transportation and custodial functions, where nothing was solved. Most notably, the neighboring city of Detroit has embarked on a program of school closings, teacher firings and privatizations with no end in sight. The union advanced no perspective for mobilizing working people to defend the jobs of support staff. They made no attempt to connect the fight of support staff in Redford with the struggles of teachers and support staff in Detroit and other cities across the state who are under relentless attack. Rather, the MEA representatives expressed agreement with the "defend our turf" strategy and offered to negotiate further concessions.

Nancy Strachan, vice president of the Michigan Education Association, appealed to the school board to reconsider their decision to privatize support staff on moral grounds. "In the grocery store will you be able to look these employees in the eye?" she admonished.

Troy Beasley, president of the Waterford Education Association, attempted to convince the board they were making a financial mistake by hiring private

contractors. “I am all for saving money. But, look carefully at the proposed savings. What is today sold as a savings will result in increased costs in the future,” he declared.

Predictably, board members made no move to reconsider their plans for privatization, ending the meeting quickly following the public comments.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to community residents and support staff attending the meeting.

Josh Thompson came to show his support for the bus drivers and custodians. “My kids go to school here. I am not for it at all. My kids will be taking the bus next year.

The thing I don’t understand is why are they firing all these people and bringing new people in? We have no input.

“They are doing a great job. Some of these drivers have been here since my wife went to school.”

Kinley Dodd, a handicapped student at Redford Schools, was on the picket line with his stepmother Jennifer and his older brother, Dakoda, to support the bus drivers. Dakoda pointed out that Kinley’s driver, Casey, also used to be his bus driver when he was in school. Jennifer explained that “Miss Casey” took care of Kinley and they didn’t want to lose her.

Dawn, a school bus driver, said, “Most of us grew up here and graduated here. People don’t like the changes.

“My ex-husband worked for Northville and they just privatized the buses there. Some of the stories you hear you wouldn’t believe,” she said, referring to unsafe conditions created by untrained drivers. “They hire people that aren’t going to stay there. You only hear it on the news when something drastic happens.”

Gary Sund a bricklayer and a parent, who spoke at the meeting, said, “I work in industrial construction. State and local governments never funded retirement properly and now they want us to give it up. If they never saved the money, its not these peoples’ fault. They really think people can work until their 80s. Well, they can’t.”

Jody Batway said, “They gave us layoff notices, but they are actually firing us because we are done working

for the Redford schools.

“For most of us it is about retirement and our health insurance. Everything will be done here June 30.

“I have heard that they will let you re-apply. But we won’t get our 30 years’ pension and they don’t have to hire us. They have taken bids from outsourcing companies, but they haven’t accepted any of them yet.

“We are fighting for our livelihoods. Many of us have grown up here; we’re alumni here.”

Carrie Drew said, “We are fighting for our jobs and asking for the support of the people of the community and other divisions of the MEA.”

Danielle Karrick, a bus driver with 16 years’ experience said, “If we lose our jobs, they are going to lose residents, because we live here. My dad worked for the school for 30 years. He died doing his job.

“We don’t just do our jobs. We do extra stuff. Volunteer. Adopt families. Help them send kids to camp. Out of our pockets we help the community

“They are trying to cover their budget off of our backs. I got my paperwork today. It doesn’t look good.”



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