Opposition grows to school privatization scheme in Detroit

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Detroit Public Schools Emergency Manager Roy Roberts has announced plans to convert 10 high schools into "self-governing" buildings to be run along business lines, with leading figures from area corporations taking a direct role in hiring and shaping the curriculum. The plans are evoking strong opposition from parents and students concerned over the future of public education.

The schools will be privately run charter schools in all but name. Members of the councils running the self-governing schools will be appointed by Roberts, and the schools will be administered by the Detroit Public Schools Office of Charter Schools. The move is another big step in the dismantling of the public school system in Detroit and its replacement by a system of for-profit schools.

Republican Governor Rick Snyder appointed Roberts, a former executive at General Motors and director at a private equity firm, as Emergency Manager of the Detroit Public Schools last year. He has continued the wrecking operation begun by Emergency Manger Robert Bobb who was appointed by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm in 2009. Over the past three years Bobb and Roberts have closed scores of schools and converted many into charters while gutting the wages and benefits of teachers.

As Emergency Manager, Roberts wields dictatorial powers granted by the state legislature to void union contracts and impose cuts. Far from waging any fight against the privatization plans and attacks on school employees, the Detroit Federation of Teachers has collaborated in implementing so-called school reform.

The first school slated for conversion to self-governing status is the Detroit School of Arts. Parents and students have been angered by the announcement that the present principal of DSA is being reassigned and that the entire teaching staff has been given layoff notices and will have to reapply for their jobs.

Nautica Singleton, a vocal student in the 10th grade at DSA told the *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team that recently visited the school, "Teachers who have worked here a long time are losing their jobs. We will have to get used to new teachers. It will be different when they are gone and we will have to start with a whole new program.

"I am very close to my teachers. The discipline and work our teachers have put in to us is excellent.

Her friend Markia Pitts added, "The dance teachers are phenomenal. I am going to college for drama so I can start an acting career." She expressed opposition to the cuts that are taking place in Detroit. "I don't have a lot of money. I think they are taking things away that we need and that are important to us. We've already lost teachers over the years."

Isaiah Grant, a student in the 11th grade at DSA, said, "I do not like this at all. If these changes go through this will be my third principal in my high school years. Our principal just got her notice. I just started to adapt to her and now she is gone."

The plan to take more schools out of the DPS system has already evoked protests. At a press conference held May 21 at the Detroit School of Arts, parents and students grilled Roberts over his plans for the school. Roberts called the press conference to announce his choices for the board that will run the school, which specializes in arts education, including vocal, instrumental and performing arts.

The six members chosen by Roberts to the Detroit School of Arts governing council include wealthy businessmen such as real estate developer Stuart Frankel and Glenda Price, president emeritus at Marygrove College and a director of Compuware

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Corporation. Price was one of those recently named to the Financial Advisory Board charged with overseeing the imposition of massive budget cuts by the city of Detroit.

When students and parents began raising strong concerns about the planned conversion of DSA, Roberts abruptly walked out of the press conference declaring, “I don’t have to listen to this. The biggest problem I see is that everyone wants to have input in running DPS. That’s not going to happen.”

Krishawn Peace, a professional actor with a daughter attending DSA, said she did not like what was happening to the school. “I am not happy with the decisions they are making. We had no say-so. We couldn’t vote. When are we going to know all the details about this?

“My daughter is going for a scholarship. The problem with that is, the school has to be part of the Detroit Public Schools to get that. What happens next year when they turn it into a charter school?

“The faculty here is for the students. My daughter needs a lot of time in the studios because she wants to become a producer. The facilities here are currently for the students, but they're talking about leasing out the facilities to the big networks, which is removing time available for the students.”

Other schools slated for conversion to self-governing status include the Dr Benjamin Carson High School for Science and Medicine, Detroit Collegiate Preparatory Academy as well as Cody and Osborn high schools.

The Detroit Federation of Teachers is giving its support to this latest attack on the right to public education. In remarks quoted by the *Detroit News*, DFT President Keith Johnson called the creation of self-governing schools “another step in our process of academic and fiscal recovery.”

Johnson’s remarks are no surprise. The DFT’s parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, has functioned as a partner in the Obama administration’s attack on public education and teachers.

Russ, a foreign language instructor at DSA with 16 years experience, told WSWS reporters that teachers were being placed under enormous pressure by the continual cuts, which are being enforced with the collaboration of the teachers’ union. “I don’t know what is going to happen. We have taken a pay cut twice. I can’t afford to live like that. I am in limbo. Should I stay and risk not having a job? I’ve got a family to support.”

Public education is a basic social right and its defense requires the mass mobilization of the working class. The Socialist Equality Party is calling for the formation of committees of students, parents and teachers to begin this fight. Such committees must be independent of both the unions and the Democratic Party. These committees must fight to unite working people in Detroit and throughout the metropolitan area against school closings, budget cuts and privatization.

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