

Detroit schools emergency manager imposes contract on teachers

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Roy Roberts, the emergency manager over the Detroit Public Schools, has imposed a new contract with the Detroit Federation of Teachers following the expiration of the old agreement on June 30.

Roberts said he was waiting for the DFT to inform its members before making the terms public. According to a report in the *Detroit Free Press* it likely includes at the very least the continuation of a 10 percent pay cut imposed last year.

The move by Roberts is the latest in a series of attacks on public education and teachers in Michigan. It follows the announcement by state-appointed Emergency Managers in Muskegon Heights and Highland Park, Michigan that schools in those districts will be all turned over to for-profit charter operators when schools open in the fall.

The imposed contract terms affect some 4,100 teachers currently employed by the Detroit Public Schools. A statement released by Roberts said the new contract “provides the flexibility needed for our schools to be successful and to meet the educational needs of the children and families who come to us,” adding, “It also produces the savings necessary for the district to ultimately return to financial solvency and remove the debt that erodes financial resources reaching classrooms.”

Under provisions of Michigan Public Act 4 enacted by the legislature last year Emergency Managers have the power to suspend collective bargaining rights of public employees and unilaterally impose union contracts. Republican Governor Rick Snyder appointed Roberts last year. Before taking over the DPS job Roberts was an executive at General Motors and a director at a private equity firm. Roberts replaced Robert Bobb, the Emergency Manager appointed by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm in 2009.

All DPS teachers and school employees have received layoff notices. DPS is expected to rehire only about 3,300 teachers in the fall due to the closure of 15 schools and the transfer of another 15 schools to the Education Achievement System (EAS), the new state-run school district managing so-called failing schools. The new system will pay drastically lower wages and benefits to teachers. Teachers in the EAS will have to pay 40 percent of medical costs and will receive a 401(k) plan instead of a regular pension. Further, they will have to work a longer school day and an extended school year of 11 months for a paltry \$5,000 extra.

All the 600 current teachers in the schools assigned to EAS will have to reapply for their jobs, with only 400 positions available. The other 200 teaching positions will be filled by Teach for America, the federal program that uses college graduates, with no teaching experience, to replace veteran teachers. In other words the schools in the EAS will be little more than holding pens for some of the most impoverished and academically challenged students in the DPS system.

The imposition of new contract terms on Detroit teachers followed a series of inconclusive meetings between the DFT and the district. DFT President Keith Johnson denounced the move by Roberts, but proposed no action to fight it, merely stating “we will take the steps that are necessary to effectively address this act of tyranny.” The DFT is likely considering another ineffective lawsuit against the district.

Over the past several years the DFT has done everything it could to suppress the anger and militancy of teachers as a succession of Emergency Managers over the Detroit Public Schools have imposed round after round of jobs cuts, concessions and school closings. What remains of the DPS is little more than a shell. Scores of schools have been closed, with many

converted into for-profit charters. Enrollment has plummeted as a consequence of continual cuts, falling to 69,000, down from 150,000 in 2003-2004.

Recently Roberts announced that up to 10 high schools are being converted into so-called self-governing buildings run on a business model with leading figures from area corporations playing a direct role in shaping the curriculum. The schools will be charter schools in all but name and will be administered by the Detroit Public Schools Office of Charter Schools. Among those corporate executives accepting seats on the boards directing the self-governing schools are Anita Ashford, vice president of energy monopoly DTE Energy, Jeff Bergernon, CEO of professional services firm Ernst and Young and Olisaeloka I. Dallah, vice president of compliance with Greektown Casino.

Currently Detroit is a district with one of the highest percentages of students in charter schools in the country and nearly one quarter of all charter schools in the US are located in Michigan. President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan have called the city “ground zero” for so-called school reform, i.e., merit pay, scapegoating teachers for low test scores and privatization.

The DFT has not opposed this frontal attack on public education, only insisting that the union be allowed to deduct dues from the paychecks of teachers at the converted charter schools. Indeed, one of those appointed to the board of the newly created self-governing schools is listed as an organizer for the DFT’s parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers.

The attack being carried out in Detroit is setting a benchmark for attacks on public education across the United States. The fight back requires the unity of students, parents and teachers in a common struggle. The teachers unions will not lead this fight. They have been fully integrated into the corporate establishment and are working closely with the Obama administration, which is spearheading the attack on public education with its reactionary Race to the Top program.

The SEP calls for the formation of rank-and-file and neighborhood committees to lead the fight to defend schools and jobs. Public education is a social right that was won in decades of bitter struggle by the working class. Its defense is inseparable from the fight for

socialism. The egalitarian concepts bound up with the right to public education are incompatible with a system based on private profit for the wealthy few.

Workers must break with the Democrats and Republicans, the twin parties of big business, and build a political party of their own based on a socialist program. Social and economic life must be reorganized on a higher principle, production for human need, not private profit.



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