

Pontiac, Michigan school crisis provokes outcry from parents, teachers

A WSWWS reporting team
14 May 2013

Parents, students, teachers, nurses, cafeteria workers, and other school employees crowded into every available space at Friday night's school board meeting in Pontiac, Michigan, to denounce demands for massive cuts.

The event bore all the marks of a deliberate provocation. Less than 24 hours before the meeting the Michigan State Board of Education said it would continue withholding aid payments from March and April, thus imposing payless paydays on district employees, as a means of forcing through deeper cuts in services and compensation. In a further act, seemingly intended to provoke those who came to oppose the cuts, the local school board made no provision to accommodate the crowd. On the contrary, they mobilized a number of sheriff's deputies to intimidate those who came.

The meeting also followed the announcement by Pontiac Schools Superintendent Brian Dougherty that he was resigning his post after less than a year on the job.

Following the meeting, Michigan State Superintendent Mike Flanagan announced that the Department of Education would release state aid for the Pontiac School District, which means that the district will likely be able to meet payroll this week. The state action came after the board approved a deficit reduction plan incorporating cuts demanded by the state. The district deficit of \$8.5 million in 2009 rose to \$37.7 million by 2012 in spite of a continuous onslaught of cuts in services, pay and benefits during that time.

Meanwhile, schools in Buena Vista, Michigan, remain closed following a decision by the state to stop aid payments to re-coop money it claims was misspent by district officials.

At the Pontiac meeting a representative for the school

board detailed the state's demand for \$220,000 in additional cuts from the annual budget as the condition for restoring the withheld payments. Carol Turpin, board president, implicitly blamed teachers for the crisis, saying that the board had paid \$86,000 over the past two weeks in compensation for substitutes.

It was palpably obvious that board members shared the contempt of state government officials for residents and employees. Parents and teachers alike were forced to sit on the floor, or stand in the hall, as the venue quickly filled past overflow capacity. "This was not done by mistake," said Brian, a school social worker. "It was done on purpose. This whole situation is very unfortunate. The people who are being hurt are the children."

When members of the board asked Oakland County Sheriff's deputies to put several people out of the meeting, the deputies refused. A deputy was overheard saying privately, "I am not going to throw them out. I cannot determine who will stay and who will leave. If we try to make people leave, it is going to be crazy."

Meanwhile, Michigan House Democratic leader Tim Greimel intervened at the meeting to insist that parents and school employees had no choice but to accept the demands of the state for massive additional cuts. The only alternative, he said, was bankruptcy or the appointment of an emergency manager armed with dictatorial powers to impose cuts.

In contrast, one teacher after another spoke out to declare their devotion to the students and their right to an education. A teacher speaking from the mike to loud support from the crowd said she was sickened by the state of affairs in the district. "The classrooms are 88 degrees, but the children come in every day to work to learn. But how are we supposed to teach with classes of 44 students in elementary and nearly 50 students in

high school?”

“We want to teach, but they are taking our pay and closing our schools,” Amy told the WSWS. “Withholding of funds is an excuse for the state to come in and sell the district to charter schools. I am not sure who benefits from privatization, but it is certainly not us. Public education is now viewed as dispensable, even as part of the problem. This is a very sorry state of affairs.”

Another teacher said, “We pay for our own supplies all the time. Teachers are getting minimum wage. Basically, there is no tenure in the state of Michigan.”

James DuBerg has been teaching in the district for 12 years. He spoke eloquently to the WSWS, with the passionate commitment expressed by many. “I am proud to say that I am an urban educator. I am proud of the kids that walk into my classroom. They work real hard. They just come with a lot of deficits.”

“The corporations are getting fat, and who is suffering?” he asked. “It is our kids who are scrabbling over the leftovers. It takes me three to four months just to get their confidence. In our building 200 out of 600 children have special needs. That is 33 percent of the total enrollment. The charter schools take only 10 percent special needs kids. The children who need the most funding are left in the public schools. They are creating a whole class of second-class citizens. Pontiac receives in funding \$7,000 per student, but next door West Bloomfield receives \$10,000 per student.”

Maria, a retired school board employee, explained to the WSWS why she had to return to work. Because of budget cuts she had to pay \$149 a month for medical insurance. Each doctor visit cost \$120 because there were a total of \$700 in co-pays that had to be paid before insurance would cover anything.

“What am I supposed to do on a fixed income?” she asked. “I can’t even go to the doctor. The Blue Cross program they gave us is worth nothing. I went to get my thyroid pills. And they rejected the claim, saying I had to pay for them myself. I had to come out of retirement after 27 years and go back to work.”

A cafeteria worker told the WSWS, “It takes all of us to run the school. To me this is terrible. It hurts us not getting a paycheck. Our district is hurting; the kids are going to charter schools. We stand to lose 200 students because of the new charter school opening in Waterford.

“It hurts me that some kids don’t even have food to eat at home. They can’t wait to get to school to get something to eat. The school board doesn’t give a damn. These people speaking here don’t give a damn about the students.”

Adrianne, a teacher with 17 years seniority in the district, said, “I am watching my district and my profession go down in flames. Privatization is hurting us, and it is killing the inner city. No matter how hard we work, none of it matters. Our best is not good enough. Morale is at zero percent.”



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