

Buena Vista, Michigan teachers still without pay

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Teachers in the Buena Vista, Michigan public schools have still not been paid following the restart of classes May 20 in the small district outside of Saginaw.

Buena Vista schools closed May 6 after the district ran out of money to pay teachers following the decision by the state of Michigan to withhold funding. State authorities justified the action on the grounds that the district misspent funds intended for a juvenile detention program it no longer operates.

Schools were closed for two weeks, affecting the district's 430 students and 27 teachers. The schools eventually reopened when the state agreed to release funds after the district adopted a draconian deficit elimination plan. However, teachers have so far not been paid.

While the district has promised to issue paychecks to teachers June 7, the next scheduled pay date, there appears little prospect that teachers will be compensated for the full back pay they are owed. According to a report posted on the Buena Vista Board of Education web site, the district's state aid for the balance of the school year is about \$460,000, while the cost of operating the district through the scheduled June 26 end of classes is estimated to be over \$810,000.

Melinda, a Buena Vista special education teacher, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Our last paycheck was May 10 and we were supposed to be paid last Friday. We are between a rock and a hard place. If they don't lay us off, we can't collect unemployment. If we quit working, we can't collect unemployment.

"I am okay financially, but I know a lot of teachers are single parents with bills to pay and kids to feed."

Details of the deficit elimination plan revealed so far call for the consolidation of the three schools in the district—an elementary school, a middle school and the high school—into one building. Buena Vista School

Board President Randy Jackson told the WSWs that the plan calls for the hiring of just eight general fund teachers and six grant-funded teachers.

Melinda added, "In order to get the money released from the state they had to propose a deficit elimination plan. It calls for an almost entirely cyber-school. There will be a district, but parents won't want to send their children. It has been going on a long time. It gets worse every year. The state keeps cutting and cutting until there is nothing left to cut any more."

At a school board meeting, called at the last minute for May 29, school officials revealed that the state of Michigan has initiated a preliminary review of Buena Vista school finances. The review is the first step in a process that could lead to the appointment of an emergency manager armed with dictatorial powers to impose cuts and rip up union contracts.

At the meeting, the mother of a Buena Vista 11th grade student spoke to the WSWs. She voiced angry opposition at the lack of information forthcoming from the board: "I just want to know what is going to happen to my 11th grader. Will he be able to go to school next year?"

"I was as disturbed and upset as the kids were about the school's closing. They say they only have funds to last through June. What about the rest of the year? I need answers. I am wondering if I need to pull her out, or what?"

The closure of the schools in Buena Vista, a largely working class and low-income community, had a severe impact on students in the district, causing many parents to scramble to transfer their children to other public schools or charter schools in the area.

In the face of this latest assault on public education, the Buena Vista Education Association and the Michigan Education Association are doing nothing, not

even organizing a protest. Teachers have been told to continue working without being paid, with little prospect of receiving their back pay. Many teachers opted to have a portion of their pay withheld from every check in order to receive compensation over the summer months. Now it appears the district will not have the funds to cover those payments.

The situation confronting parents, students and teachers in the Buena Vista schools is only the sharpest example of the assault on public education being carried out across the state of Michigan and nationally. Schools in Pontiac, Michigan faced closure after the state withheld payments from the district, only agreeing to restore aid after a program of drastic cuts was adopted by school officials.

Recently the public schools in the state capital of Lansing decided to eliminate art, music and physical education teachers as part of a deficit reduction plan. The job eliminations were part of a package of cuts ratified by the Lansing Schools Education Association earlier this year in advance of the implementation of the state's new right-to-work law. The Michigan Department of Education estimates there are now 108,000 students in the state who receive no arts education.

The Ypsilanti public schools are in the process of consolidating with the neighboring Willow Run schools, which will lead to the elimination of 20 percent of the jobs in the new combined district. In preparation for the consolidation, all 350 teachers were laid off and told they had to reapply for their jobs.

Since taking office, Obama has presided over the destruction of some 300,000 positions and the closure of some 4,000 public schools in the US. His administration is overseeing the dismantling of public education, forcing states to compete for federal aid by expanding charter schools and imposing attacks on teachers, such as merit-based pay schemes.



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