

Suburban Detroit teachers, support staff protest wage-cutting

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Teachers, paraprofessionals and education support staff in the Ferndale Public Schools—just north of Detroit—picketed a school board meeting Monday evening to protest pay cuts of up to 12 percent. Under the impact of state cuts of \$480 per student in 2013 and decreasing enrollment the district is seeking to make school employees pay for a \$6 million shortfall over the last two years.

Inside the building, the school board unanimously approved a drastic concession contract backed by United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 889, which bargains for the paraprofessionals. This is the first step in imposing pay cuts throughout the district.

The teachers' union, the Michigan Education Association (MEA), is still in negotiations. The union called the rally essentially to allow angry workers to let off steam while offering no proposals for a struggle. On the contrary, the MEA provided the school board with "helpful" suggestions, which include raising student fees. A third union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), heads up the negotiations for school custodians.

Ferndale is a small suburban Detroit school district. Like communities throughout the state, it has been squeezed by the terrible growth of poverty, up 115 percent in suburban areas according to the Brookings Institute, and unremitting budget cuts from state and federal authorities. The school district to the west, Hazel Park, almost had a state-appointed emergency manager imposed last year after its deficit swelled to \$3 million. The school system in Detroit for years has been under control of emergency managers, which have shut down scores of public schools and boosted charter school enrollment to the highest percentage of any US city except New Orleans.

Similar to Detroit—where an emergency manager

initiated the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history—the attacks on education and city services have been implemented by Democrats and Republicans alike. Ferndale and Hazel Park have now said they can no longer sustain their fire departments at adequate staffing levels. There is a plan to combine the districts and enact a millage by residents so that they can pay for fire service, according to a statement last week.

In addition to school workers, the protest outside of Monday's meeting attracted many local residents deeply angry about the assault on education. Several protesters carried homemade signs denouncing wage cuts and other attacks.

Donna Cunningham, a 14-year veteran paraprofessional in the UAW, told the WSWs about the near poverty wages Ferndale already pays and the district's demands for further cuts. "My pay has gone from \$11.73 to \$10.86 (a reduction of more than 8 percent). I work on a school bus for children with special needs. Some have Down Syndrome."

A single parent with three children, Donna said her 20-hour per week job is her only source of income. Meanwhile her food stamp allotment was cut by the Obama administration from \$267 per month to a paltry \$125.

UAW 889 President Tom Brenner, responsible for recommending the wage-cutting contract, told the press, "The mutual respect (School Board President Meier and I) have for each other helps us to resolve difficult situations and rise out of them to best serve the students in the district." He continued cavalierly, "It is a sacrifice for my members for the remainder of this school year, but we're helping the district with their financial crisis, and moving forward for a better district and a better union. This sacrifice now will definitely benefit us over the course of the contract."

School Board Superintendent Meier returned the compliment, saying, "...I appreciate the courage of the UAW to work with the district to invest in the future of the district, and that's the approach we're really taking with all of our employee groups."

Of course, the slashing of pay has nothing to do "improving the district" as the two claimed. On the contrary, it is only a prelude for further attacks on teachers and public education.

Protesters expressed an entirely different sentiment over absorbing endless concessions and watching the steady decline of the school system. A school bus driver said, "They are cutting us 7 percent and going to put a higher deductible on insurance. A family would have to pay up to \$7,000. Right now our deductible is \$200 for an individual and \$400 for a family. I just came back from having cancer, so I know I will have to spend \$2,000 on my medical bills."

Glen, a Detroit firefighter for five years, attended the picket to support his wife, who is a Ferndale teacher. He told the WSWS, "They already took away my pension. They eliminated pensions for anyone not already vested. Now we are in a 401k. They cut our pay 10 percent and raised our insurance premiums. It is going on across the country. It definitely hurts. And our union hasn't done anything."

Another school bus driver added, "We have already taken cuts. We are paying more out of pocket for our insurance. We have bus drivers who have two jobs and work eight hours a day. We have bus drivers who are the sole support of their families, so the cuts mean a lot. Top pay here is \$18 per hour, but they reduced us to \$13 for waiting time. If we do custodial work they bring us down to \$13 per hour. We used to work eight hours a day during the summer doing custodial and garage work. To save on money they cut us down to six hours."

Kathryn Jenkins, a Ferndale resident, said, "I think what is happening here is terrible. The teachers do not deserve a pay cut. It is unfair to teachers and the students. What is the future... home schooling? Depending on what is happening I might not have sent my children here to Ferndale schools. These teachers really care and go above and beyond. I had two children graduate here and go to college. You have both Democrats and Republicans who are not interested in doing what is right. Everyone is getting their hands

greased. The Congressman and Senators get free medical."

A custodial worker with seven years added, "It's both the Democrats and Republicans. It's rich against the poor. It has been going downhill here for years. We have given up a ton of concessions over the last 10-15 years. I think we need to dig our feet in. People will take what you let them take.

"Charter schools seem like the next wave coming in. It is like what they are doing with privatizing bus drivers and custodians."

Scott Collins, a social studies teacher at University High School, commented; "Knowledge is power. Education is one of the things that are most underfunded in the United States. What disturbs me the most is how much this is really the board's issue. With all the cuts in education that have been carried out by the state, how much more can you cut back? We are losing quality teachers. Teachers are even flooding out of Troy, a district teachers used to look to in terms of quality."

Collins was critical about the Obama administration's education policies, "What confuses me about Race to the Top is that the testing metrics are all messed up. And I don't like the appointment of Arne Duncan as education secretary. He's not an educator, he's a businessman."

These sentiments were in sharp contrast with those of the officials from the UAW and MEA. Teachers' bargaining representative Jason Gillespie ascribed the whole problem in Ferndale to Republican Governor Rick Snyder's cut of the foundation grant funding, deliberately concealing the role of President Obama who, with the assistance of the unions, has spearheaded the assault on teachers and public education on behalf of corporate America.



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