

Detroit Public Schools announces 10 percent wage cut, new round of school closures

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New budget documents submitted by the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) to the state of Michigan show that the department is planning a 10 percent cut to the wages of teachers and education workers to go into effect over the next year. DPS claims that the plan's aggressive cost-cutting measures will completely eliminate its \$120 million budget deficit by fiscal year 2017-18.

The 2015 budget plan advanced by DPS seeks to reduce spending on wages by \$21.1 million, including cuts of \$5.7 million to wages for instructional staff support and \$2.1 million for school administration workers. Pending approval by State Superintendent Mike Flanagan the wage cut will go into effect on October 1. The proposed cuts follow the defeat by Wayne County voters of a proposed countywide property tax increase.

DPS has been under emergency management since 2009, when Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb, the first of a series of emergency managers, assumed dictatorial powers over the district's finances.

The DPS budget calls for the elimination of 1,381 jobs by 2019, including 152 teaching positions, and proposes to extract an additional \$13 million in savings from its employee health plans. The budget also calls for the closure of 24 schools between 2015 and 2019 and proposes to sell 40 vacant school facilities, victims of previous rounds of school closures, to the city of Detroit for a mere \$5.5 million. Golf and tennis programs for both boys and girls will be terminated under the new plan.

Keith Johnson, president of Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), issued a statement protesting the cuts and blaming the school district for "fiscal ineptitude"

"The district has always had to save money...But who in their right mind submits a budget that has contingency money in it, saying that this budget is in part predicated upon a millage that we hope passes? It is completely irresponsible to base your budget upon money that you did not know you would have," Johnson said, referring to

the fact that the initial budget submitted by DPS was rejected by the state of Michigan on the grounds that its revenue assumptions were too optimistic.

Following his empty criticisms of the budget, Johnson insisted that the cost-cutting moves were part of a basically correct policy.

"Every cut that we have taken over the last five years was designed to put the district on the path to fiscal solvency," Johnson said.

As these comments show, Johnson and the DFT fully support the savage assault on public education being waged by federal, state and local officials.

Together with the nationwide American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the DFT completely accepts that US public schools need to "save money" by slashing spending. Far from opposing the cuts, DFT head Johnson merely argues that the cuts have been carried out in an "irresponsible" manner, while insisting that cuts are necessary to ensure "fiscal solvency."

Indeed, the DFT has helped spearhead the ferocious assault on Detroit's public education system, working together with Mayor David Bing to impose harsh concessions on teachers and accelerate the privatization of education.

With crucial assistance from the DFT and AFT, Detroit's political establishment has overseen the gutting of the city's public education system, described by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan as "ground zero" in the Obama administration's education "reform" agenda.

Toeing the line of the Obama administration's "Race to the Top," which has promoted a slate of reactionary "reforms" at the state level, the DFT backed a 2009 DPS contract linking teacher pay to "merit" evaluations and enacting a two-year wage freeze for teachers. As part of the 2009 DFT-backed contract, DPS eliminated the district's Blue Cross/ Blue Shield employee health plan and reduced spending on Detroit teacher health care by

\$28 million.

The same contract included the so-called Termination Incentive Plan, a maneuver designed to cut DPS' payroll taxes and pressure teachers to accept early retirement by deducting \$500 from teachers' pay every month, to be reimbursed only after teachers leave the system.

The 2009 agreement itself followed a previous concessions contract, which axed 2,400 DPS employees and closed 29 schools. Every subsequent contract has seen further massive waves of closures, wage cuts, and layoffs. The DPS contract announced in January 2013 called for 28 school closures by 2016, as well as 1,688 layoffs and the slashing of \$200 million from education spending in the city over the next 5 years.

Beginning with the creation of the State School Reform/Redesign District (SSRRD) by Democratic Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm in 2009, the AFT bureaucracy supported the transfer of numerous Detroit public schools into the hands of a special school district controlled by the state government, the Education Achievement Authority (EAA). The new district removed wage and job protections for teachers and cleared the way for the systematic replacement of veteran teachers by low-paid Teach for America recruits.

There were 150,000 students enrolled in the DPS system in 2000 but by 2013 DPS was planning to reduce the student population to only 40,000.

For its part, the AFT was an early and enthusiastic supporter of Obama's presidential campaign, claiming he represented "school reform with us, not against us." AFT has since been rewarded for its loyal service to the US ruling class through the creation of new charter schools run directly by the union bureaucracy.



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