

Detroit teachers union president retires

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Last week Detroit Federation of Teachers president Keith Johnson announced he would not seek re-election after six years of heading the teachers union and 21 years in the DFT leadership. Retiring at the age of 60, Johnson announced he planned to go on to a career as an arbitrator and author.

The retirement of a union functionary like Johnson does not generally merit comment. After years of betrayed strikes, mass layoffs and school closings, few if any teachers look to the DFT as a force to defend their interests. It is worth taking note of Johnson, however, because he typifies the social type that made their way up their ladder by collaborating in the wholesale destruction of teachers' conditions and public education as a whole.

In comments to the *Detroit Free Press*, Johnson said he is working on a book entitled, "How to Destroy the Public Education System for People of Color." Putting aside Johnson's self-serving promotion of a racial, rather than class, explanation of these attacks, the retiring DFT president certainly is an expert on how to destroy a public education system, having spent the last two decades serving as an enthusiastic partner of those doing the destroying.

In a piece praising Johnson, *Detroit Free Press* columnist Rochelle Riley wrote, "Keith Johnson brought new life, reality and fresh air to a union that was so steeped in tradition that some of its members didn't want to rid the system of ineffective teachers..."

Like his mentors in the national leadership of the American Federation of Teachers, Johnson fully embraced the right-wing effort to scapegoat teachers for the miserable conditions in the schools caused by poverty and decades of budget cuts. He championed the AFT slogan of "school reform with us, not without us," offering the services of the DFT in the corporate-backed program of punitive tests, closing "failing schools" and expanding the number of for-profit

charter schools.

"When you look at the innovative and effective reforms designed to move our students forward, they are usually achieved through collaboration and the collective bargaining process, not through dictating and micro-managing," Johnson told the *Free Press*. For his efforts, AFT President Randi Weingarten made Johnson one of the national union's vice presidents.

Johnson came to prominence following the retirement of long-time DFT president John Elliott. In his last act, Elliott collaborated with Mayor Dennis Archer and Republican Governor John Engler to suppress a nine-day strike by teachers in 1999, which erupted after they rejected a proposal by the DFT for a contract extension. Since the strike, the membership of the DFT has been halved, falling from 8,000 to barely 4,000 today, with the bulk of the job losses taking place after Johnson became president in 2008.

During his tenure Johnson fully backed the destructive policies of the Obama administration, which announced in 2011 that Detroit would become "ground zero for school reform." The DFT backed Obama's "Race to the Top" education initiative—which "incentivizes" cash-strapped school districts to adopt anti-teacher measures and open up more charters. Johnson collaborated with a succession of emergency managers appointed to discipline teachers, close down schools and allow for the proliferation of charters and other quasi-public entities such as the crisis-ridden Education Achievement Authority (EAA), set up by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder in 2011.

As a result of these ruinous policies, Detroit now has more students enrolled in charters than in public schools. It is likely that the state will move to eliminate public education entirely in the city, following the precedent set in New Orleans, where the education system has essentially been privatized.

Johnson is a long-time tool of the Democratic Party

who sought to sow illusions in this or that politician like former Governor Jennifer Granholm, the first to appoint an emergency manager, Robert Bobb, over the Detroit Public Schools. In 2010, Johnson had to fend off a recall attempt by teachers because of his collaboration with Bobb's campaign of school closures, layoffs and concession demands.

In the face of angry opposition from rank-and-file teachers, Johnson would invariably rely on the state's punitive anti-strike laws and threats that teachers would face "dire consequences" if they fought to defend their livelihoods.

At a mass meeting of teachers in 2009 Johnson fought tooth and nail against a growing strike sentiment among teachers. As the WSWS reported at the time, "There was widespread disquiet among teachers as DFT President Keith Johnson argued that strike action and any resistance was impossible and made the preposterous claim that his commitment to 'work together' with Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb would result in a 'fair and equitable' contract offer in two months' time."

Johnson also held the threat of economic ruin over the heads of teachers, saying he would not order them to "withhold your ability to provide for your families" by going on strike. He asked teachers, "how many of you because of the economic times we are in are either the primary or sole breadwinner in your household?"

Despite his frequent red-baiting of left-wing opponents in the DFT, Johnson was not averse to forming alliances with the pseudo-lefts who made up the loyal opposition in the DFT. At that same 2009 meeting, he gratefully accepted support from the middle class radical group BAMN's (By Any Means Necessary) representative in the DFT, Steve Conn, who backed Johnson's proposal for a 60-day "cooling off" period in order to push through a 10 percent pay cut, one that is still in effect.

The *Free Press* quotes Johnson commenting with contempt that "90% of them (teachers) I never see or hear from because they don't have any problems." In reality, this is only a measure of the deep alienation and hostility teachers feel for the DFT.

Johnson is essentially jumping off a sinking ship. With Michigan's right-to-work legislation, the DFT anticipates thousands of teachers will quit paying dues, undermining the financial underpinnings for the high-

paid salaries and other perks of Johnson & Co.

He alluded to this, telling the *Free Press*, "Certainly right to work changes the narrative because I'm from the era...when your union membership was never a question. Now that narrative will change. You're going to have to go out and convince people to be part of a union. That will be hard for any union, but especially a teachers' union with the assault that has been laid on them."

Looking for a cozier job, Johnson added, "I want to become an arbitrator... I want to be able to do it on a national level so I can keep my mind, what's left of it, fresh. Plus, they make \$1,800 for a case that takes a couple of days."

Johnson embodies all of the characteristics—abject subservience to the Democratic Party and the corporate interests they defend, anti-communism and contempt for the working class—that make up the American trade unions today. That is why the path of defending teachers and the right to public education is through a break with these right-wing organizations and building a socialist political movement of the working class.



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