

# New president of Detroit teachers union looks for collaboration with Democratic Party

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At a meeting of around 300 teachers on Sunday, newly elected local union president Steve Conn urged teachers to “rebuild” the Detroit Federation of Teachers in order to press a coalition of business executives, Democratic Party operatives and union officials to stop the dismantling of public education in Detroit.

Conn is a longtime operative inside the DFT who has sought to posture as a left union activist. He was sworn in as president of the 3,000-member union local last week after winning a run-off election earlier in the month. Although he won the election by exploiting the disgust of teachers with the DFT—which has been a partner in the destruction of public education and teachers’ conditions for decades—Conn differs from his predecessors only in rhetoric, not substance. The meeting itself barely attracted 10 percent of the remaining union membership.

In his remarks, Conn said Detroit teachers were in the “vortex of a national attack on public education,” but he avoided any mention of President Obama or Education Secretary Arne Duncan. In 2009 Duncan said that Detroit was “ground zero” for the administration’s “school reform” agenda of punitive testing and teacher accountability schemes, the closing of “failing” schools and the proliferation of charter schools.

While noting that governor-appointed emergency managers have left the district “with the most degraded school conditions in the nation,” Conn failed to point out that Michigan’s former Democratic governor, Jennifer Granholm, installed the first financial manager over the Detroit schools. Successive Democratic mayors and city councils, moreover, have overseen austerity budgets exacerbating the crushing poverty that afflicts more than half of the city’s schoolchildren in order to finance corporate tax cuts and debt payments to Wall Street.

These omissions were quite deliberate. Conn is politically affiliated with By Any Means Necessary (BAMN), an organization closely aligned with the black Democratic Party political establishment in Detroit, including US Congressman John Conyers and former Detroit city

councilwoman Joann Watson.

Sitting behind Conn on Sunday was national BAMN spokeswoman Shanta Driver, a regular guest of the Black Congressional Caucus, Jackson’s Rainbow/Push Coalition and other Democratic Party-affiliated organizations. Driver’s law firm—Scheff, Washington & Driver PC—has made a lucrative business out of representing the union bureaucracy and various Democratic Party-controlled bodies, including the former Detroit School Board, in cases challenging state takeovers. She has made a career arguing that maintaining the Detroit political establishment’s control of business contracts, city assets and other perks was a “civil rights struggle” against racism.

When teachers at Sunday’s meeting questioned why Driver was present, Conn said she was “doing pro bono work” for the union, adding that she had helped him get his job back after being fired for leading a protest against school closings.

For nearly three decades, Conn has insisted that teachers, parents and students could roll back the attacks on public education through various trade union tactics and protests. Despite the occasional claim to be a “socialist,” Conn has vehemently opposed the fight for a politically independent movement of the working class against the bipartisan, corporate-backed attack on education. At critical junctures—including during teacher strikes in 1999 and 2006 and in the 2009 contract fight—Conn functioned as a “left” lightning rod, helping the DFT disarm teachers and contain their opposition within the parameters of the Democratic Party and trade union apparatus.

For this reason, Conn and his faction share political responsibility for the disaster that has befallen teachers and schoolchildren in Detroit. The number of working teachers in public schools has fallen from 12,500 in 1999 to less than 3,000 today. Since 2003, half of the city’s schools—more than 100 in total—have been closed by “school reform boards” or emergency managers appointed by successive Democratic and Republican governors. More Detroit students are now enrolled in charters (54,000) than public

schools (47,000).

In his remarks, Conn acknowledged that, “the teachers union largely capitulated” to the attacks on public schools, but he made no attempt to explain why. Instead he sought to maintain the fiction that the betrayals were the result of misguided policies that were now going to be corrected. This is part of his effort to rebrand the DFT with a new “left” face and prevent teachers from breaking from the pro-capitalist organization.

In this regard, Conn said nothing about the DFT’s parent union, the American Federation of Teachers, which, in the name of “school reform with us, not against us,” has taken millions from Bill Gates and other enemies of public education, virtually banned strikes and colluded with Obama’s war against teachers and public education.

Following the model of the “grand bargain” in the Detroit bankruptcy, the corporate and political elite have decided to include the AFT, DFT and the United Auto Workers in a so-called Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren to legitimize the final dismantling of the public school system. (See: “What is the Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren?—Unions, Democrats and Republicans form school privatization group”.)

Conn is part of this process, a fact highlighted by the seven-point program Conn presented at the meeting to “rebuild the DFT in 2015.” While several resolutions were designed to win support from teachers—including smaller class sizes, more support staff and supplies, ending state control of the schools and canceling the district’s debts—its overriding aim was to protect the financial and institutional interests of the union apparatus. Point six, for example, resolved that: “The DFT will begin a union organization drive at EAA (Education Achievement Authority) and charter schools.”

Republican Governor Rick Snyder and the state legislature established the EAA two years ago to take over low test-scoring schools in Detroit and other cities. These schools have been handed over to private business interests who employ low-paid teachers with few if any rights.

Responding to Conn, one teacher exclaimed angrily, “We want to abolish the EAA, not organize them!” Conn defended his position, saying the two questions were not mutually exclusive. “Organizing” these teachers, he claimed, was part of the campaign to rid the district of charter schools and the EAA.

This is a fraud. The DFT faces an exodus of members when its contract with the Detroit Public Schools runs out June 30 and Michigan’s new “Right-to-Work” law—which makes union membership and dues payment voluntary rather than a condition of employment—goes into effect for Detroit teachers. The union is therefore desperate to gain a foothold in the charter school industry. It has no intention of opposing

the further privatization of public education but only wants to get a “piece of the action,” from the dismantling of the schools.

It is noteworthy that the Chicago Teachers Union—whose vice president, Jesse Sharkey, is a leading member of International Socialist Organization—shut down and sold out the strike by 35,000 teachers in 2012 in exchange for a deal that opened the door for an AFT-affiliated union to “organize” the city’s largest charter operator.

Conn’s demand for the “Reincorporation of EAA and the charters into DPS,” directly coincides with the proposals by the Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren, which is calling for a common or universal enrollment system for all Detroit Public Schools, EAA schools and charters. This ploy, which makes it easier for parents to enroll students in charter schools, was used by Louisiana school authorities one of whose representatives is now Governor Snyder’s liaison to the Detroit coalition—to turn New Orleans into an all charter district.

The last of Conn’s proposals reads: “Be it resolved, that the DFT leadership will deliver to the Emergency Manager and the Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren the union’s resolutions.” Here Conn bestows legitimacy on these political conspirators and urges teachers to focus their energies on the hopeless task of persuading financial dictators and corporate-backed coalitions to change their ways. While such a perspective would spell disaster for teachers, this is no doubt a signal from Conn to the powers-that-be that his “firebrand activism” is nothing but rhetoric needed to fool teachers, and that he is somebody they can work with.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed a statement to teachers Sunday (see: “The political issues facing Detroit teachers”), calling for a break with the DFT and the building of new organizations of struggle, independent of the unions and the Democratic Party and based on a socialist program.



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