

The political struggle facing Detroit teachers

Jerry White
27 January 2015

The following leaflet was distributed to teachers attending Sunday's union meeting in Detroit.

Detroit teachers are once again in a battle not only to defend their jobs and living standards but to defend the right to public education, which is under assault across the United States. After decades of budget cutting, school closures and teacher layoffs, the corporate and political establishment in Detroit is moving for the wholesale privatization of the public schools. For Wall Street, the breakup of public education is seen as a vast “market opportunity.”

This is why the fight to defend public education is a *political struggle* against not this or that politician or emergency manager but the entire economic and political establishment, from the Obama administration and Governor Rick Snyder to the Democrats and Republicans on the state and local level.

In 2009, Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan, proclaimed Detroit to be “ground zero” for so-called school reform and would “leapfrog” New Orleans for the number of students enrolled in charter schools. Today, after successive emergency managers—appointed by Democratic and Republican governors alike—more students are enrolled in charters than traditional public schools.

Fresh from outsourcing public services and jobs in Flint and Saginaw, the new emergency manager, Darnell Earley, has been brought in to deepen the attack represented by Snyder's Educational Achievement Authority (EAA) and turn over the Detroit public schools to various charter-school hucksters and other business interests. Proposals to overcome the “fragmented school system,” are only ploys to carry out the final charterization of the school district.

The Detroit bankruptcy is being used as the model for this attack. In a repeat of the “grand bargain” of private foundations, both big business parties and the unions that gutted constitutionally protected city worker

pensions and jobs, the misnamed Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren has been set up to make proposals on restructuring the Detroit Public Schools. Snyder's liaison to the Coalition is Paul Pastorek, the former Louisiana state superintendent of education, who helped convert New Orleans into an all charter district.

Who is in this coalition? They include: corporate executives from the Skillman Foundation, General Motors and DTE Energy, which have been involved in plans to “shrink” Detroit while tailoring education to meet their business needs; former Emergency Manager Roy Roberts who slashed the wages and benefits of teachers and oversaw school closings and the launching of the EAA; and various African-American and Hispanic entrepreneurs looking to profit from new charter school operations.

Joining this conspiracy against public education are the American Federation of Teachers (David Hecker), the Detroit Federation of Teachers (Edna Reaves) and the United Auto Workers (Jimmy Settles) who are also members of this coalition.

The highly paid union executives, from AFT President Randi Weingarten to recently retired DFT President Keith Johnson, have never opposed “school reform.” They gladly collaborated with and took money from open enemies of public education like billionaire Bill Gates and supported Obama's pro-corporate Race to the Top schemes. Suppressing opposition from teachers to merit pay, school closures and punitive teacher “accountability” schemes, the businessmen who run the teachers unions have chiefly been concerned with cashing in from charter schools by collecting dues from low-paid instructors.

The new DFT president, Steve Conn, called today's meeting for teachers “to voice their concerns about rebuilding the union and saving public education.” The way forward for teachers is not “rebuilding the DFT,” a

thoroughly pro-capitalist, corrupt institution, but organizing a struggle based on an entirely new political perspective and program.

While the vote for Conn reflected the disgust of teachers for the repeated betrayals of the DFT leadership, his record shows he too is wedded to the DFT apparatus and is opposed to a political struggle against the Democratic Party, which has led the attack on public education and teachers in Detroit.

Teachers should be forewarned that Conn has long sought to limit the struggles of teachers to impotent protest, safely within the confines of the Democratic Party. From the strikes in 1999 and 2006 to his collaboration with former DFT President Keith Johnson to block a strike in 2009 by agreeing to a 60-day contract extension, Conn's insistence that trade union actions were all that teachers needed to defend their jobs and public education has led to a dead end.

The various factions led by Conn, from the Membership Action Caucus to the Equal Opportunity Now/By Any Means Necessary group, have concealed the class forces at work, claiming that the attacks on public education were "racist." In Detroit, however, this assault has been overseen by African American Democrats: emergency managers Roy Roberts and Robert Bobb; mayors Archer, Kilpatrick and Bing; and, at the highest level, by Barack Obama.

The systematic destruction of education is not the result of "misguided" or "mistaken" policies—which can be stopped through protests or even strikes whose aim is to persuade the powers-that-be. Instead it is the deliberate policy of the entire ruling class, which is driven by the crisis of the capitalist system and its insatiable drive for self-enrichment to take back every achievement ever won by the working class, from health care and pensions, to public education, Social Security and Medicaid.

The DFT has worked, hand in glove, in the destruction of public education in Detroit. It is not accountable in any way to the working class but functions as a tool of the corporations and the government. The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers to break with the DFT and organize new forms of struggle, including rank-and-file committees and neighborhood committees to fight school closings and budget cuts, free from the influence of the unions and the Democratic Party.

Militant struggle is needed, including strikes and mass protests. But such struggles must be guided by a clear political perspective and strategy. This must be based on the fight for the working class to take political power, break the grip of the financial oligarchy and radically redistribute society's wealth.

The claim that there is "no money" for education, decent wages or other socially necessary pursuits is a lie. Trillions have been used to bail out banks, enrich executives and stock market investors and fund criminal wars. The resources exist to eradicate poverty, vastly improve public education and guarantee a decent future for the next generation, but to obtain them the working class must seize the ill-gotten gains of the financial criminals, nationalize the major corporations and take control of the wealth workers produce.

This is the fight for socialism. The Socialist Equality Party is fighting to build the revolutionary leadership to carry out this struggle. We call on all teachers looking for a way forward to contact and join the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact