

Drastic cuts to suburban Detroit school district

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The suburban Detroit, Michigan city of Hazel Park is laying off nearly a quarter of its school district staff and slashing the pay of the remaining teachers and support personnel.

The “inner-ring” Detroit suburb was established as a bedroom community of autoworkers in the 1940s. At one time, 75 percent of the residents worked at the nearby Ford Motor Company Highland Park plant. The city has no significant industrial tax base, but it has historically relied on a now aging horse-racing track, where revenues have drastically declined.

Since 2008 Hazel Park has been hit hard by declining residential home values and foreclosures, compounded by a drop in state revenue-sharing dollars by one third.

Revenue sharing is a redistribution policy mandated by the state constitution, but in recent years the formulas for this redistribution have been continuously violated. The state legislature, under both Democrats and Republicans, has funded increasingly lavish tax cuts for big business, while cutting revenue-sharing to localities that are tasked with funding public services.

According to the non-partisan Citizens Research Council, this “raid” of assets amounts to some \$5 billion. Detroit alone lost \$732 million in revenue-sharing, which was a significant factor in the city’s bankruptcy.

In February, Hazel Park voters passed a millage to increase homeowner property taxes in order to prevent the closure of the Hazel Park fire and ambulance services. Without a series of such regressive tax increases, the city would have joined the growing numbers of Michigan municipalities that have been placed under the control of an emergency manager, forced to sign a consent agreement with the state or thrown into bankruptcy.

These same economic factors, combined with declining enrollment, have put the school district on a path of growing deficits. Accounting discrepancies have also allegedly served to conceal the extent of the deficit until

earlier this year.

A Deficit Elimination Plan has now been put into place that will cut 46 teachers and a total of 169 staff positions, devastating the already struggling district. Unionized staff will take another \$2.1 million in cuts, and food services will be outsourced.

The unions involved have uniformly agreed to the cuts and concessions. Stating their acquiescence to the gutting of the schools, Hazel Park Education Association (HPEA) President Amy Zitzelberger told the media, “The layoffs will certainly be hard on our unit, but we understand the necessity of these cuts.” The HPEA represents 199 teachers, social workers, counselors and psychologists in the district.

The sentiment among students and staff is much different. In discussions with the *World Socialist Web Site*, students and staff opposing the cuts raised a wide range of political and social issues connected to the defense of public education, including the role of the unions, the growth of social inequality and the government’s massive spending on imperialist war.

Even as the US is involved in an escalating number of predatory wars and conflicts across the globe, spending on K-12 schools has been cut in 44 out of 50 US states, and some 300,000 school district jobs have been eliminated nationally since 2008.

Brianna, 15, was angry about the cuts to her school. “They’re laying off three English teachers and three math teachers. We were told at least three teachers were being cut from every subject. We need more teachers, not less. When I first came here there were 45 kids in my math class. They’re cutting junior varsity cheerleading, and if they cut music it would be completely outrageous.

“More and more the teachers are telling us to do our work online. I think they are using technology to replace teachers. But if we’re learning from a computer instead of in school, how are we going to make friends or learn how

to problem-solve? Most kids already have problems communicating; this will only make it worse.”

Dr. Rick Repicky, Interim Superintendent, admitted as much when he stated in a public Q&A session that “these cuts may force ... classes to go online, but the reality is that online classes are the norm...”

Referring to the pay cuts teaching and support staff face, Brianna continued, “Teachers work very hard. The kids here are not always the nicest. If anything they should get a raise for working with us.”

When asked about the fact that the government was spending trillions on wars, Brianna responded, “People need education more than they need to go to war.”

An educator with 40 years experience at the nearby Ferndale Schools stopped to speak with the WSWS, saying, “They tell young people to ‘pull themselves up from their bootstraps.’ That was never possible. But now you see children facing problems like never before. In Inkster there used to be one out of every five children living in poverty. Today it’s three out of every five. I have special training, and my position uses federal Title One money so I can intervene and help at-risk kids. But these programs are constantly being cut.”

MT, a senior at Hazel Park High School, added, “It’s wrong to fire teachers when kids need an education. It’s obvious that we need to be educated and go to college and be somebody. Students want to do something about this! We’d like to fight to change it.

“I myself think it’s unnecessary that we have these wars going on. It’s why schools are going broke—all the money is going to war.”

Two Hazel Park High School custodial workers, Dave and Celia, discussed the crisis. “They are cutting and cutting and cutting. It’s layoffs and pay cuts for all of the staff,” said Dave.

“I can’t see why we are paying for someone else’s mistake,” said Celia, referring to the district’s accounting discrepancies.

Celia said she had been notified that she was losing her job after four years of service. “I moved to Hazel Park for this job. I had been out of work for two or three years and wasn’t a ‘spring chicken,’ so I moved into the district to work here.

“This really hits hard,” she emphasized. “I live in Hazel Park. I am a taxpayer with a child in Hazel Park Schools. This will make the classrooms larger for the kids- how can it not with so many teachers being let go?

“In my opinion, the teachers are saints for what they do,” Celia affirmed. “Meanwhile the district is privatizing

everywhere. I am all for public educators.”

Dave also objected to the constant elimination of jobs. He pointed to the decades of devoted service by those in the custodial department. “I use the term ‘indentured servant’ all the time around here. We all do a lot of things that are not in our job description—to go above and beyond. We help parents find their children and do whatever we can to help.

“The fact is that most of these kids will graduate, leave this school and join the military. The military recruiters are here all the time. They want to make these kids stupid, so that they join their army and fight their wars—wars that are all about oil.

“We need to come together and squash this, all of us workers, us non-rich. It’s no different here than it was in Rome.”

Wayne, a bus driver for an outside contractor, was at the school driving track team members to the Hazel Park meet. He said that it was the same in his district.

“The fact that they are shutting down schools in Detroit is unbelievable. These schools are not necessarily dilapidated at all.

“The kids are the future, if we are not supporting them, what is the future?”

“The unions are in bed together on these things. I worked in the automotive industry. There you see it. They are no longer at odds with the companies, but they are both on the same team.

“It was the same thing when I worked at AT&T for ten years. I made \$27/hour, but now these guys they bring in with U-verse, it’s \$15/hour for the same job. It is just as stressful as it was. It’s unbelievable, and it’s worse every contract.”



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