

Detroit Federation of Teachers president ousted by union executive board

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On August 12, the Executive Board of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) removed Steve Conn, a leader of the organization By Any Means Necessary (BAMN), as union president. The board compounded the action by expelling him from the union.

Narrowly elected last January in a 614-599 vote, Conn has faced a series of right-wing challenges from the union faction associated with former DFT President Keith Johnson, including a recall petition in the spring and misconduct charges filed in June.

A politically motivated, two-day “trial” in August found Conn guilty of “illegal cancellation of meetings, illegal attempts to convene special meetings, and failure to preside over meetings in accordance with the bylaws;” “failure to investigate abuse of members,” including an alleged physical assault; and “failure to pay per capita dues” to the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). While the procedural issues are a pretext for removal, the Executive Board statement goes on to indict Conn for a “conflict of interest” citing his “alignment to an outside group,” namely BAMN.

The ousting of Conn is an undemocratic maneuver, historically unprecedented for the DFT, by a bloc of the union “old guard,” long known for its collaboration in the destruction of public education. The expulsion sets a precedent for the witch-hunting and victimization of any teacher who opposes the right-wing policies of the DFT.

The opposition by the WSWs to Conn’s expulsion, however, does not imply any political support for Conn or the pseudo-left policies of BAMN. The WSWs has long warned teachers that these forces are deeply hostile to a struggle by teachers to unify the working class in defense of public education.

BAMN’s specialty is a toxic mix of divisive and reactionary racist politics, narrow trade union demands, provocative stunts and self-serving opportunist alliances with sections of the Democratic Party and trade unions bureaucrats. BAMN’s role has been to actively block teachers from drawing the political lessons from the systemic destruction of the Detroit Public Schools (DPS), while using protests and rallies to forge its own relationships with the black Democratic Party establishment in the city that has spearheaded this attack.

This action of the DFT takes place at a critical juncture. As school opens for the 2015-16 year, DPS Emergency Manager Darnell Earley is demanding draconian cuts to school workers’ health care benefits, which may inflict as much as \$11,000 a year in out-of-pocket costs.

Even more sweeping is the anticipated decision by the Michigan legislature this fall to reorganize and possibly even dissolve the district in favor of charter schools and other business entities. The DPS enrollment is down to 46,000 children from 165,000 as recently as 2002, with more than half of area schoolchildren in charters.

There are two competing proposals: the DFT-endorsed platform of

the Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren and the “good DPS/bad DPS” plan advanced by Republican Governor Rick Snyder. Both are designed to expand charter schools and school privatization. Paul Pastorek, the architect of the all-charter New Orleans district, was hired as a consultant by Snyder and is heavily involved in the initiatives.

Worried they might be substantially swept aside, the DFT officials purged Conn in a symbolic gesture to reassure policymakers that the union will continue to be an essential partner in the decimation of public education. In return, the DFT apparatus hopes it can gain access and dues money from a new crop of highly exploited charter schoolteachers.

Alignment with an “outside political force”

While the Executive Board charges that Conn is aligned with an outside political force, the DFT and its parent union have long operated as wholly owned subsidiaries of the Detroit and national Democratic Party, a political force that is hostile to the interest of teachers.

Under Obama, over 300,000 teachers and other school employees have lost their jobs. The president and Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, have made it government policy to encourage the privatization of K-12 education. They have diverted vast sums of public resources to corporate interests while school districts are starved of funding and thousands of public schools have been shut in Chicago, Detroit and other cities. Last month, the AFT reiterated its political “alignment” with the Democrats by endorsing Hillary Clinton who is identified with the Obama administration’s corporate-backed “school reform” agenda.

In protesting the charges against him, Conn never pointed to the DFT’s double standard when it comes to political affiliations. That is because BAMN is also politically allied with the Democrats.

Conn/BAMN share political responsibility for the Obama administration’s unprecedented assault on education. In 2008, Conn and BAMN told black workers that Obama’s election would be “an assertion of their long-denied rightful place in American history.”

On balance, Conn’s ouster has all the markings of a sordid conflict between various factions of the Democratic Party over the division of the spoils from the dismantling of public education.

The record

Conn's accusers, led by Executive Vice President Ivy Bailey and former DFT President Johnson have already permitted the closure of dozens of Detroit schools, the elimination of thousands of jobs and the slashing of wages and benefits of teachers.

For their part, Conn and BAMN's role has been to both obscure the issues and block the unity of teachers by insisting that the attacks on education are racial, rather than class-based. While he is portrayed in the bourgeois media as a "self-proclaimed socialist," Conn is nothing of the sort. For decades, his organization, formerly known as the Revolutionary Workers League, has rejected socialism in favor of identity politics and has falsely promoted the unions as "workers' organizations."

While Conn and BAMN relentlessly claim that the emergency managers and school closures are part of the "new Jim Crow," Shanta Driver, the founder and national chair of BAMN, has made a lucrative career promoting Affirmative Action lawsuits. Hired by Conn on behalf of the DFT in March, Driver and her law firm have been long allied with various unions and Democratic Party-controlled bodies, including the Detroit School Board and Detroit City Council. Her forte is to argue that control of assets by these corrupt institutions is a "civil rights" issue.

BAMN—like the pseudo-left more generally—speaks for aggrieved sections of the upper middle class, including minority businessmen, union bureaucrats and lower-level politicians, who, far from opposing capitalism, want to get a "piece of the action."

Throughout his career, Conn has worked to contain the struggle of teachers within limits acceptable to the Democratic Party and the financial interests that stand behind both capitalist parties. This was true during the teachers' strikes of 1999 and 2006. In 2009, he collaborated with his supposed arch nemesis Johnson, and Emergency Manager Robert Bobb, to block a strike.

In 2011, BAMN lent its efforts to derail the struggle against the closure of the award-winning Catherine Ferguson Academy (CFA) school for girls in Detroit. It described the school's sale to a for-profit operator as "a victory" and rallied hand-in-hand with former Detroit City Councilwoman JoAnn Watson and other Democrats. As the WWSW warned, this agreement laid the basis for the closure of the school, which took place in 2014, a terrible blow to its students and staff.

Conn's fellow BAMN member, the late John Riehl, called an isolated walkout by Detroit Water and Sewerage workers in 2012, largely to protest a judge's suspension of automatic dues check off. At no time did Riehl call for workers throughout the city to rebel against the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which was collaborating with Democratic Mayor David Bing to impose hundreds of millions of dollars in concessions on workers. The adventure led to the victimization of several strikers and paved the way a year later for Bing to conspire with Governor Snyder to throw the city into bankruptcy and work with AFSCME to impose a precedent-setting attack on pensions, health benefits and public assets.

Since winning the union presidency in January 2015, Conn has continued his rhetoric and impotent or provocative protests, urging teachers to apply pressure on state politicians. Last April, Driver and Conn met with the DPS Emergency Manager Darnell Earley to present him with a list of demands while organizing a picket outside the building.

This was followed by a rally in Lansing April 30 attended by a few hundred teachers, forcing the closure of 18 schools, at which Conn laid all blame for the attacks on education in Detroit at the feet of Republican Governor Rick Snyder and the "white" Lansing legislature.

Significantly, despite Conn's official position of "no more charters," both he and the AFT hierarchy apparently concur on "organizing" charter schools, i.e. getting dues money, rather than opposing the destruction of public education in the interest of these largely for-profit entities.

Conn's removal from the position of DFT president epitomizes the dead end of his claim that the unions can be "democratized." The treatment meted out to him only further exposes the anti-working class character of the DFT and AFT, which are not in the least manner accountable to teachers.

Nationalist and completely subservient to capitalism, the unions in the US and around the world have been integrated into the structure of corporate management and the state. They function to suppress the class struggle and impose relentless demands for austerity.

Predictably, Conn is responding to his ouster by once again calling on members "to assert control of the union," this time by voting to overturn his removal at the next union meeting.

No doubt, many teachers look upon the whole affair with a combination of disbelief, hostility and, perhaps for some, indifference, since the DFT has long ceased to be an organization that defends the interests of teachers and support staff. Conn has been removed not because he posed any threat. Instead the DFT wants to intimidate teachers because it fears that its collaboration in yet another restructuring plan will provoke popular opposition, which the union apparatus will not be able to contain.

The fight for high quality public education—like the struggle against war, police violence and to defend all of the social rights of the working class—is not a trade union, but a political question. Teachers and all workers are in a direct confrontation with the Democratic Party, the unions and the capitalist system they defend.

New forms of genuine working class organization, including rank-and-file committees, must be built independently of the existing trade unions. These committees should aim to unite teachers with the broadest section of the working class—autoworkers, city workers, service workers, the unemployed, retirees and the youth.

Above all, teachers must break with capitalist politics and fight for an independent political movement of the working class to seize the ill-gotten gains of the corporate and financial elite, and carry out a radical redistribution of society's wealth to address the horrendous growth of poverty seen every day in classrooms throughout the country. The ending of the profit system would provide more than sufficient resources to ensure free and public education for all, from pre-K through college and lifelong learning. That is the socialist program fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.



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