

Detroit teachers union removes local president despite majority vote by membership

Sheila Brehm
22 September 2015

More than 1,000 Detroit current and retired teachers attended the first union meeting of the school year on September 17. The extraordinary turnout, more than one-quarter of the entire membership, expressed the determination of teachers to rebuff the unprecedented and anti-democratic removal of former union president Steve Conn in a sordid maneuver by the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) Executive Board.

Under the DFT constitution, Conn had the right to appeal to the membership for an override of the ouster, requiring a two-thirds vote of the membership. The majority of teachers voted for his reinstatement as president, in the 527 to 473 division of the house, but the vote fell short of meeting the two-thirds requirement, so Conn's ouster remains in effect.

Conn, a leading member of the pseudo-left organization By Any Means Necessary (BAMN), was the victim of a politically motivated two-day "trial" in August. He was found guilty by the Executive Board bureaucrats of five misconduct charges including "illegal cancellation of meetings, illegal attempts to convene special meetings and unauthorized affiliation with BAMN." BAMN promotes a combination of adventurist stunts and racist identity politics, and is oriented to the trade union apparatus and sections of the Democratic Party.

The DFT hierarchy, no doubt with consultation with the right-wing national leadership of the American Federation of Teachers, went to great lengths to intimidate rank-and-file teachers and suppress opposition to Conn's ouster. The whole set-up dripped with the union's hostility to its membership and disdain for their basic democratic rights, which demonstrated that this attack on Conn was actually

directed at the teachers themselves.

Prior to the meeting, the DFT's web site posted rules for the meeting which included "the prohibition of signs or banners ... only full dues paying members in good standing are allowed in and required to produce their membership cards and photo identification." A particularly intimidating rule declared that, "If the Meeting Chair recognizes a member as being out of order, that member will be subject to removal."

As the time of the meeting approached, doors to the Masonic Temple, a huge local auditorium, remained locked. Finally, as hundreds of teachers were milling about awaiting entrance, only one door was opened at 4:15 p.m. Teachers were still required to line up, in the hot sun, while waiting for each individual union card to be checked before the bureaucracy would admit them.

During the meeting Conn was given a mere five minutes to address the body. Members were only allowed a further 15 minutes for comments and questions before the vote, despite the overflow attendance.

The substantial vote on Conn's behalf indicate that teachers were not intimidated and are increasingly looking for a way to oppose the DFT officials, longtime collaborators in the attack on public education.

At the same time, the DFT's disregard of a majority vote is itself an indictment of the bankrupt and opportunist policy, espoused by Conn and BAMN, of seeking to "rebuild" or reform the unions. The AFT, like the entire AFL-CIO, has become a business entity preoccupied with collecting dues and suppressing the struggles of the working class.

The DFT, now led by interim president Ivy Bailey, has done nothing to fight against Detroit's Emergency

Manager and the attempt to privatize education in Detroit, called “ground zero” by Obama’s Education Secretary Arne Duncan. Instead, it is focused on ensuring that their particular union faction maintains the AFT franchise, with all the perks that entails.

It should be noted that a matter given almost no attention at the meeting is the draconian cuts to workers health care benefits demanded by DPS Emergency Manager Darnell Early, which the union estimated would cost each member as much as \$11,000 a year.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed the statement Detroit Federation of Teachers president ousted by union executive board to hundreds of teachers at the meeting. The SEP position of opposing the undemocratic attack on Conn, while warning of the rotten politics of BAMN, was warmly received and read with considerable interest.

Tanisha, who works with special education students, told the WSWS why she voted to reinstate Conn: “The process was undemocratic. My vote was not support for his political beliefs. None of the charges, even if they were true, should have resulted in kicking him out. I do not understand how the Executive Board claims the process used against Conn are in the union bylaws. If that’s the case, then the bylaws need to be replaced along with the people who wrote them.”

Another teacher, Carolyn, who also voted for Conn’s reinstatement told the WSWS, “I don’t know about the bylaws, but it should be majority rules. It was unfair. The voting process took considerable time, with each member standing up and declaring his or her position, and there was almost no time for discussion.

“I’m not so sure about Conn, except he appears to be fighting for us. We need someone to fight. Public education is being destroyed by the charters. Today I make less money and work more hours and the conditions of our students are heartbreaking. There were days last winter we had to close our school because the heat did not properly work, and many children did not have warm enough coats.”

The day after the union meeting, Conn and his supporters announced plans either to form a new union, possibly named the Detroit Teachers Union, or to affiliate with another union. Such a perspective represents a dead end for teachers and a political trap. The labor unions today operate entirely as corporate entities, sordidly scrambling after dues money while

conspiring against the rights of workers.

Both BAMN and the DFT, instead of fighting to stop the further privatization of the school district, are advocating the organization of charter schoolteachers into the unions, seeing the highly exploited charter teachers as a source of dues income.

The fight to defend public education requires not new and “improved” unions, but a political struggle encompassing the entire working class and directed against both capitalist political parties and their representatives.

The US Census Bureau recently reported that Detroit is once again the poorest large city in the nation. The vast gap of social inequality is growing each day. More than 57 percent of children in the city live in poverty. Such a deplorable state of affairs profoundly impacts the teachers.

The nature of the DFT and all unions is to separate workers from a political struggle against the source of these conditions—decaying capitalism. The defense of education requires the abolition of profit, most certainly in education, but throughout the economy as well, freeing up the resources to end poverty and provide all of the basic rights of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact