

“Our livelihood is at stake”

Teacher sickouts spread in Detroit

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Hundreds of Detroit Public Schools (DPS) teachers are calling in sick and not reporting to work to protest low pay, budget cuts, dilapidated buildings and moves to privatize public education by a state-appointed emergency manager. Last week, six schools were closed and it is expected that up to 40 schools, nearly half of the district, may close Monday as anger continues to mount.

A particular target of the shutdowns is the pending reorganization of the district being promoted by corporate-backed “school reform” forces, including Republican Governor Rick Snyder and DPS Emergency Manager Darnell Earley, a Democrat and the former emergency manager of Flint who oversaw the poisoning of the city’s water supply.

Last week schools were closed at Cass Technical High School, Renaissance High School, English Village Preparatory Academy, Mann Learning Community, Davis Aerospace Technical High School and the Golightly Career and Technical Center.

Earley hypocritically condemned teachers for depriving students of their education, saying, “a minority of teachers” were “using students as pawns.” In fact it is Earley who is overseeing the process of depriving young people their right to a decent education in order to funnel public resources to the wealthy bondholders who hold the school district’s debts and to for-profit charter school operators.

Meanwhile the Michigan Legislature and the news media are pushing for rapid action on the DPS debt, which will only deepen the assault on the schools. It was announced last week that the district’s new debt service payments will cause it to run out of money by April, in the middle of the school year. All three political factions in dispute—the Snyder Republicans, the Coalition for the Future of Schoolchildren

Democrats and Tea-Party voucher advocates—seek to use the ballooning of school debt to push through a district-wide reorganization that further tilts the district towards privatization and will attack pensions.

For its part, the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) has collaborated with all the emergency managers imposing pay cuts and health benefit takeaways, forcing a \$9,000 per teacher Termination Incentive Plan “loan” to the district, accepting thousands of layoffs and closures of schools. The DFT has signed onto the Coalition for the Future of Schoolchildren plan, an alternate version to forcing students and school workers to foot the ballooning debts to the financial industry.

Allied with the Obama administration, which is spearheading the attack on public education nationally, the DFT and its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), are only looking to be partners in “school reform.” The AFT has recently put the local under trusteeship and flown in a raft of “organizers” to Detroit. The main concern of the AFT is to suppress opposition to the destruction of public education and try to forestall a mass exodus of teachers from the discredited organization next June, when right-to-work laws will enable instructors to opt out of paying dues.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to teachers about the conditions they face.

“Our livelihood is at stake, that is why we are having the sickouts,” said one teacher. “We have our families to feed and our kids go the DPS schools. We are DPS.

“But they set us up to fail. Why did the DPS debt increase so much? We don’t manage the money. They claim that it’s because 150,000 students were ‘lost.’ They weren’t lost, they were given away to the EAA [Education Achievement Authority] and the buildings were given to the charters. We are set up to fail. They are shutting public schools down. They run schools like

a business now.

“Our school, Davis Aerospace and Golightly Career, had a sickout Friday, but the news didn’t cover it. We teachers are all voicing the same thing: the learning conditions are suffering. Many buildings are cold. Some have heat and others don’t.

“But the media calls us the ‘bad guys.’ We didn’t do this. We have no control. There are too many students in the classrooms. A lot of my coworkers are quitting DPS. Myself, I need to find a second job because I can’t afford this.

“They took nearly \$10,000 from each of us, on top of pay cuts, and they promised that would mean smaller classes and better conditions. It didn’t happen.”

Asked about her feelings about DPS Emergency Manager Darnell Earley, the teacher said her comments were not printable. She added, “He claims the sickout is unethical, well who is unethical? Earley poisoned thousands of children in Flint.”

She added, “I am very, very disappointed in the DFT. Ivy Bailey, our new president, issued a statement on the DFT website saying the union ‘didn’t condone’ the sickouts. Why should she be talking about her members this way? It’s an insult to the members and not fair to us.”

Another teacher told the WWSWS, “Yesterday we got an e-mail saying we’re going to have a union meeting on Thursday. The only reason she [Ivy Bailey] sent that e-mail was because she saw how angry teachers were on and what they said about on ‘Let it Rip’ [a local] television program.

“Teachers are always the first to get stepped on like a roach. Here’s an example. I had a student in third grade class who could not read. I called downtown and spoke to the lady who was over the entire reading program. She was supposed to send me books that January. When did I finally get the books I needed for that child? In May. By then I had already brought books that I had from home to use.

“I have been working at DPS for more almost 25 years. Right now there are 350 positions that are empty in the schools. Teachers are quitting the job in droves. The situation is so bad.

“When I came to DPS there were 177,000 students. Now they have about 45,000. Where are all those students? A lot of them are in charter schools. And we see these children coming back to DPS, a few a day,

back into our school. Of course, we have to take them and of course the charter school already has gotten the funds for them.

“There are a lot of young people working in the schools now. Teachers now are taking things by the hand and doing it themselves. I think the situation is going to explode. No, I know it’s going to explode.

“People do not know how things really are. For a long time they’ve had 35 kids in the classrooms. But look at what you have in that classroom. You may see 12 students who should be in a self-contained Special Ed class. Another group needs social services. Others need counseling and the counselors are just too busy.

“Do you know how many students I see every day that are in crisis? We notice it around the time that people start needing heat. The children are living with a different relative every night just to have a warm place to sleep. I had a child come in the week before Christmas. How do you bring a child to new school and enroll them the week before Christmas? Well, you’ve finally found a place with some heat you can stay.

“Snyder said he was going to bring in his new plan to fix the schools in January. They say this is all about the kids but none of them at the top really care about the children. The way I see it, you have a bunch of small Bernie Madoffs trying to make out like a rat with cheese but all at the expense of the children.”

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