

“For too long we looked to the union... now we have to do it ourselves”

Teacher sickouts shut two-thirds of Detroit schools

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12 January 2016

Hundreds of Detroit Public Schools (DPS) teachers called in sick Monday morning in a coordinated protest against intolerable conditions in the schools, pay cuts of 20 percent or more and the dictatorial policies of the state-appointed DPS emergency manager. The sickout shut down 64 of the district's 97 school buildings, according to DPS officials, affecting 31,000 out of 47,000 students.

The struggle has largely erupted outside of the control of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), which has a long and sordid history of collaborating with state and local officials, including successive emergency managers, to destroy educators' jobs and livelihoods and shift resources into for-profit charter schools.

At a hastily called press conference Monday morning, DFT Interim President Ivy Bailey feigned support for protesting teachers while making it clear that the DFT was “not advocating a sickout.” In an effort to regain control of the rebellious teachers, Bailey called for public hearings into decaying school structures and unsanitary conditions, claiming the DFT “would not stand by” while school employees faced conditions similar to those in Third World countries.

After decades of budget cuts, many schools have been left to rot, making it impossible for students to learn. Many buildings are infested with rats, roaches and bedbugs. Schools have broken boilers and no heat, leaking ceilings and black mold on the walls.

Due to a shortage of hundreds of teachers, class sizes are as high as 45. At the Thirkell Elementary-Middle School, for example, there are so many teacher vacancies that eighth-graders are housed in the gym and pulled out for instruction in core subjects for only an hour or so each day.

It is precisely because the DFT has “stood by” and colluded in imposing such conditions that teachers are taking matters into their own hands. “For too long we have been looking to the union to do something. Now we figured we have to do it ourselves,” a long-time teacher protesting outside the Detroit Schools headquarters told the *World Socialist Web Site*

Monday. “We feel we are grossly mistreated. There is money for everything else but our children. The children are the victims and we are the victims. We felt we had to stand up. We have to have a voice.”

“This is a rogue movement by teachers. It isn't a movement by the DFT or the AFT [American Federation of Teachers],” Shalon Miller told the WSW. “It's a movement by the teachers on the front lines everyday that is not sanctioned by any party. We have been facing a bipartisan attack on education by both the Republicans and Democrats.”

“Education is big money,” she continued, “and the rich want to get their hands on it the same way they raided the pensions of city workers in Detroit. That was supposed to be unconstitutional. We have an oligarchy in this country instead of a democracy. The workers are going to have to stand up because the unions have been bought out.”

While Detroit city officials, including Mayor Mike Duggan, City Council members, and even Emergency Manager Darnell Earley have promised to address teachers' concerns, behind the scenes they are doing everything they can to strangle the struggle. Republican state legislators in Lansing are threatening to hit teachers with massive fines or the termination of their jobs if they continue the sickout, claiming the action is a strike, which is illegal for public employees under state law.

“These ridiculous antics are simply so-called adults depriving schoolchildren of valuable instruction time,” state Senator Phil Pavlov, who is chair of the Senate's Education Committee, told the *Detroit News*. “They are clearly deliberate and coordinated efforts to shut down schools, and they absolutely merit the legislature's attention. In fact, we are looking right now into the legal definitions of strike conditions and other potential measures to address this situation.”

These threats should not be taken lightly. They make it all the more imperative that teachers rally the broadest possible support from working people for their struggle. The fight to defend public education is a political fight against corporate and financial interests, backed by both big business parties,

which seek to profit by looting public resources.

To fight such powerful forces, teachers must turn to their allies--the millions of autoworkers, city employees, postal workers, airline workers and other sections of workers and youth who are facing the same attacks on jobs, wages, pensions and social programs such as education. The conditions exist for building up a common struggle. Just weeks before the teachers' sickouts, tens of thousands of autoworkers were rebelling against the United Auto Workers to fight for improved wages and oppose the attacks on health care and pensions.

The sickouts have been organized largely by teachers associated with the Facebook page "DPS Teachers Fight Back." Describing itself as a "union within a union," the group says it is not affiliated with any faction of the DFT, either current President Ivy Bailey or former President Steve Conn.

Conn, a supporter of the pseudo-left By Any Means Necessary group, which is closely aligned with the Democratic Party in Detroit, has tried to take credit for the protests, largely in an effort to regain his office after the DFT Executive Board ousted him in a factional dispute last year.

The Fight Back group called a rally at school headquarters Monday that was attended by more than 100 teachers. While the teachers expressed a determination to fight, the platform at the event was handed over to various Democratic politicians, including State Representative Sherry Gay-Dagnogo and City Councilwoman Mary Sheffield, who claimed to support the teachers.

Gay-Dagnogo, a member of the Detroit Caucus in the state legislature, attempted to portray the issue as a racist attack by a Republican governor against a majority African-American school district. "This is not happening in West Bloomfield or Southfield schools," she said. "The state created the deficit. This is a civil rights issue. The actions are unethical; we're going to Lansing to demand equality for our children."

Such comments are aimed at driving a wedge between teachers in Detroit and teachers in the suburbs and other cities. In fact, budget cuts and school closings are sweeping the state and country and are being imposed by Democrats and Republicans alike. The Obama administration has overseen the greatest attack on teachers and public education in US history. Obama's former Education Secretary Arne Duncan worked with Republican Governor Rick Snyder to make Detroit "ground zero" for corporate-backed "school reform."

The DFT and the AFT are allied with the Democrats not because the Democratic Party defends public education. It does not. The union promotes the Democrats because that big business party generally utilizes the services of the unions to suppress the opposition of teachers and workers more broadly to the destruction of education.

Tania Chico, a middle-school teacher, said, "[AFT President] Randi Weingarten personally negotiated our contract. They said if we gave \$10,000 in a 'loan' to the school district we would avoid taking a 10 percent wage cut. After we paid \$9,600, they

instituted the pay cut anyway. My husband works at DPS too. Between us, we have lost \$1,000 a month. How do you adjust your budget to that?

"Today the legislature is trying to pass a bill to make it illegal for a teacher to call in sick or use a day for 'personal business' to express ourselves like this."

Referring to Obama's former education secretary, Arne Duncan, Chico said, "He took his Chicago agenda national when he got to the White House. We are fighting for the children. These are not racial questions. It is about our children deserving the best."

Carla Bond, who has over 20 years at Cook Elementary as a science teacher, said, "I want everyone to know that the attacks have led to my personal bankruptcy. I can no longer afford my home and I am going to lose it. My wages have dropped 20 percent over the last 10 years. I invest a lot of my personal money to have what I need. Last year alone I spent \$3,000 just for science experiments. My kids go to Detroit schools and I love teaching and their being there, but I am losing everything."

Sarah Jardine spoke to the WSWs about why she was participating in the fight. "The quality of education has been going down ever since emergency managers have been running things. I am a special education traveling teacher, so I get to see many of the buildings. I was so excited for DPS when I saw them renovating Denby High School. My heart was broken when the school went to the EAA [the state-run Education Achievement Authority district for so-called failing schools]. Our only demand is to bring attention to the inequality in education in Detroit."

Kelly Williams, who has 13 years at DPS, said, "I went to school this morning and spoke to my kids. They told me to go downtown and stand up for them. I have 40 kids in each class. I have to write grants to get what I need and I still spend \$3,000 a year on supplies. How dare they say we don't care about our kids!"



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