

# Detroit public schools teachers continue sickouts

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Detroit public school teachers continued rolling sickouts yesterday, forcing the closure of 24 schools or over one-fifth of the district. This follows Monday when 64 schools were closed, as hundreds of teachers have taken a united stand against the overcrowding of classrooms, unsafe schools, budget cuts and privatization.

It is an unprecedented feat by teachers who have used social media and local connections to develop the initiative as a grassroots campaign organized independently of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT). The militancy of teachers has taken both government officials and the teachers union by surprise. Both have gone into overdrive to try to suppress the snowballing protests and prevent them from taking a politically independent form.

Republican Governor Rick Snyder, who has presided over millions of dollars worth of cuts to Michigan schools, including the shuttering of entire school districts, issued a statement saying the sickouts came “at the expense of the kids,” and threatened state retaliation if the struggle continues.

Public employee strikes are illegal in Michigan and state legislators have been trying to find a mechanism to categorize sickouts as strikes. In the hopes of carrying out mass firings and/or imposing fines, they also seek to eliminate teachers’ right to a hearing in the event of victimization.

The lead editorial in the *Detroit News* Tuesday was headlined “Fire DPS strike ringleaders,” and called for state legislators “to make it easier to punish teachers who break the law.”

Meanwhile, the DFT—discredited for its willingness to sign onto any concessions contract, layoff and school closure handed down by a succession of emergency managers—has been unable to stop or control the sickouts and has gone into crisis mode.

For the DFT and its national parent organization, the

American Federation of Teachers (AFT), it is now ‘all hands on deck’ to try to quell the protests while at the same time trying to prevent further loss of union membership come next June, when members will be able to opt-out under the state’s right-to-work law.

The level of crisis by the union bureaucracy is indicated by the fact that Randi Weingarten, AFT president, is flying into town to address a mass union meeting this Thursday. She will be joined by Michigan AFT President David Hecker and DFT Administrator Ann Mitchell. Weingarten is notorious for her intimate connections with all manner of school privatizers such as the Gates Foundation, as well as her mantra, “School reform with us, not against us.”

Meanwhile, the corporate media, from the local Detroit press to the *New York Times* and UK-based *Guardian*, have falsely claimed ousted DFT president Steve Conn is the leader of the protests. But teachers have gone through an experience with Conn’s brand of pseudo-left racial politics and unprincipled maneuvers with the Democratic Party, and the organizers of the sickouts have specifically dissociated themselves from him.

Both the politicians and the union are “discovering” for the first time the scandalous conditions of the schools. Yesterday, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan toured schools with AFT official David Hecker and health and building inspectors. Seeing a dead mouse in Spain Elementary School and four-year-old children who had to wear their coats in class, Duggan admitted it was “deeply disturbing.”

“The situation in the Detroit Public Schools is far worse than we ever imagined,” said Ivy Bailey. This from the current DFT interim president and former executive vice president! After being “shocked, shocked” like the police inspector in *Casablanca*, Bailey has called for public hearings into DPS schools to try to retain some feeble credibility.

The list of health and safety violations, as posted on the DFT website, should really be the basis of a series of criminal indictments against the Democratic Party emergency manager Darnell Earley, the state officials, including Republican Governor Snyder, and the DFT/AFT which has colluded with them.

The DFT writes: “A few examples of current school conditions:

- Spain Elementary-Middle School: Black mold, the gym floor is buckling, the swimming pool is broken, the boiler has problems and the garden is unusable because of debris.

- Thirkell Elementary-Middle School: Not enough teachers, so eighth-graders are housed in the gym and pulled out for instruction in core subjects for only an hour or so each day. The ceiling is so compromised that rain and snow pour in. Teachers get just one prep period a month.

- Osborn High School: The building is literally falling apart.

- Moses Field School (for students with severe cognitive impairment): Boiler is broken, causing drastic temperature fluctuations; infestations of rats, other rodents, roaches and bed bugs; and no security guard.

- Palmer Park Preparatory Academy: Pieces of the ceiling are falling on kids’ heads and rats run around.

- Jerry L. White Center High School: No heat, no security guard.

- Bates Academy: Security issues, mice, heating issues, computers are broken.

- Dossin Elementary-Middle School: Standing water in classrooms, holes in the ceiling, a classroom without power due to black mold in the wiring.

- Sampson Academy and Douglass Academy for Young Men: No heat.

- Ronald Brown Academy: A special education class has no textbooks; slimy growth on the walls and crumbling ceilings.

- Western International High School: Rats, roaches, not enough books, classes with 45 students.

- Golightly Education Center and Emerson Elementary-Middle School: Classes with 45 students.

- Mann Elementary School: Untrained teachers forced to administer medication to student suffering severe seizures.”

Nearly 50 years after Jonathan’s Kozol’s sensational expose of substandard education and crumbling infrastructure in the Boston schools, entitled *Death at an Early Age*, millions of schoolchildren are being subjected

to the same or worse learning conditions. DPS teachers and administrators have reported these violations for years with no results. The fact is that they have become endemic, not just in Detroit, but across the United States as education has been systemically defunded.

Despite these conditions, Detroit teachers continue to express their determination for the rights of students and teachers. They aim not only to redress the most immediate problems, but to rebuff the efforts of the state to privatize the DPS, destroy pensions and open the schools to the education “market.” Such an effort will inevitably bring teachers into conflict with both the Democrats and Republicans and the capitalist profit system.

Theresa, with seven years at the DPS, told the WSWS, “We have to fight. When I was a postal worker they tried to take our pensions away. We had to fight for them then. This is a fight of the whole working class.”

“I make less now than when I started 20 years ago!” said another veteran teacher. “I went to work in Inkster but they closed the whole district down. So I went from \$79,000 a year down to \$56,000 to come back to Detroit Public Schools. I lost my home; I couldn’t afford it.”

An Education Achievement Authority teacher added, “Conditions are getting a lot worse. Nobody wants to come and teach. So DPS hires teachers who are not even certified. Now they look at the finances and are going to steal our pensions. It’s been their plan all along.

“Earley was sent in to wreck the schools. They send in black capitalists to destroy public schools and send the funds to private entities such as charters. The union does not represent teachers. The sickout has been organized by teachers going on social media and organizing. The teachers need a political force to pull out all their energy.”



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