

The Detroit teachers' fight to defend public education

Jerry White
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The *World Socialist Web Site* salutes the fight by Detroit teachers against the deplorable conditions in their schools and urges workers throughout the US and internationally to support their stand in defense of public education.

On Monday, hundreds of teachers took part in a coordinated “sickout” that closed two-thirds of the district’s 97 schools. On Tuesday, 24 schools were closed. The job actions have been organized independently of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), which has long collaborated in the bipartisan attack on teachers and the public schools.

The WSWS condemns the attacks by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder and his state-appointed emergency manager, Darnell Earley, who are hypocritically denouncing the teachers and accusing them of abandoning their students. The enemies of school children are not their teachers, but the Republican governor and his Democratic hatchet-man, who are looting school funds and teacher pensions and handing the money over to wealthy bondholders and privately owned, profit-driven charter school firms.

The movement in Detroit has been largely organized by rank-and-file teachers associated with the Facebook page “DPS teachers fight back,” which stresses that it is not associated with any faction of the DFT or its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers. Describing itself as a “union within a union,” the insurgent movement of teachers is giving voice to the growing militancy and mood of resistance that is spreading among workers throughout the US and around the world.

It is no accident that social opposition is taking the form of a rebellion against the existing trade unions, which have long served as industrial police for the corporations and government. Their suppression of

strikes, which last year fell to the second lowest level on record since 1947, has allowed the corporate-financial elite to wage a one-sided war against the working class, resulting in the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top of the society in American history.

The teachers have entered into struggle only weeks after tens of thousands of workers at Fiat Chrysler, General Motors and Ford clashed with the United Auto Workers union, leading at Fiat Chrysler to the first rank-and-file rejection of a national UAW contract since 1982. Millions of other workers in the airline, steel and telecommunications industries, and public-sector workers, including teachers, state employees and US Postal Service workers, are eager to do battle after more than a decade of falling real wages and sharp cuts in health and pension benefits.

President Obama is planning to visit the Detroit Auto Show next week to hail the supposed revival of the former Motor City, which he, along with the rest of the political and media establishment, equates with record profits for the Detroit-based auto companies and the gentrification of parts of the city’s downtown.

This has been paid for by the slashing of autoworkers’ wages and benefits under the Obama administration’s 2009 forced bankruptcy of GM and Chrysler, the gutting of city workers’ pensions and health benefits, and the privatization of public assets carried out in violation of the state constitution in the 2013-2014 Detroit bankruptcy. This theft of workers’ income could not have been accomplished without the support of the DFT, the UAW and the other unions.

Meanwhile, autoworkers cannot afford to buy the cars they build and hundreds of thousands of city residents live in utter destitution. While the \$400-a-ticket charity gala at the auto show this Friday will be the occasion

for the wealthy glitterati to show off the latest fashions, furs and jewelry, just blocks away, the city's children are packed into classrooms with 45-50 students in ice-cold, rat- and roach-infested school buildings that have leaking roofs and black mold.

Sixty miles away, the residents of Flint, Michigan, a devastated and deindustrialized former center of GM production, have had their water supply poisoned by lead due to the criminal actions of the city's former emergency manager, Darnell Earley, the very same bankers' puppet chosen by Governor Snyder to exercise dictatorial powers over the Detroit schools.

Detroit is a symbol of the failure of American capitalism, a system that subordinates the basic necessities of life to the profit drive of the corporations and banks.

In the first half of the last century, autoworkers in Flint, Detroit and around the country wrenched major concessions from the corporations as a result of mass struggles carried out in the face of violent repression by the auto bosses and the state. The ruling class never forgave the workers, and by the late 1970s, with the international decline of US industry accelerating, the corporate and financial elite initiated a war against the working class.

Detroit, which had the highest per capita income in the US in the 1960s and one of the nation's best school systems, was ravaged by plant closings, mass layoffs and the decimation of social services. It was transformed into the poorest big city in America. Far from opposing this, the UAW, the DFT and the other unions functioned as junior partners in the attack on the working class.

The Detroit schools have been under emergency management for nearly a decade. In 2011, Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan, called the city "ground zero" for educational "reform" across the country. In the mouths of politicians and media commentators, "reform" is a code word for the dismantling of public education and its transformation into a for-profit, private business openly organized along class lines, with working class youth condemned to dilapidated holding pens where education is made impossible.

The Obama administration has fully backed the efforts by Governor Snyder and local Democrats to punish teachers for the educational problems in a

district where more than half of the school children live in households below the poverty line, which face the constant reality of hunger, and electricity and water shutoffs.

Confronted with these horrific conditions every day and the indifference and hostility of the political establishment, including the unions, teachers have concluded that they have no choice but to fight. In an open letter to parents, a veteran Detroit special education teacher apologized not for the sickout, but for not standing up sooner, writing: "I, the teacher you trusted, had power to start a revolution and fight for you, and I didn't fight back. Tonight, I am going to make you a promise that I won't sit quiet any longer."

Education is at the center of the fight for social equality. The American ruling class, drunk with profits and hell-bent on stealing everything that is not nailed down, has repudiated the democratic principle that all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, have the right to a high-quality education.

While handing trillions to the financial crooks who crashed the economy in 2008, and squandering trillions more in ever-expanding wars, the Obama administration has cut Title I funds earmarked for impoverished districts like Detroit by 11 percent and reduced special education funding by 9 percent.

The struggle to defend public education poses the question of who controls society's wealth and decides how it is distributed. Under capitalism, the wealth produced by the collective labor of working people is monopolized by the super-rich, which controls the entire political system and both the Democratic and Republican parties.

That is why the fight for education, along with every other social right—to a good paying job, health care, a comfortable retirement, a future for youth free from poverty, war and police brutality—requires the development of a mass political movement of the working class to put an end to capitalism and institute common ownership of the productive forces and social equality under socialism.



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