

As union, Democrats try to smother protests

Detroit teachers issue demands to defend public education

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Detroit Public Schools (DPS) officials were forced to shut five schools Wednesday because of a shortage of teachers as protests by educators continue against deplorable school conditions and attacks on wages and benefits by the state-appointed emergency manager.

On Monday, two-thirds of the city's 97 schools were closed because of the "sickouts" and on Tuesday teacher protests closed 24 buildings.

Rank-and-file teachers have organized the job actions independently of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), which they rightly view as an accomplice of the state and local authorities that have decimated the once-thriving school district.

Educators associated with the Facebook page "DPS Teachers Fight Back" have played a prominent role in the coordinated protests. In a statement released by the group Wednesday, they said, "We are NOT a group fighting for union leadership! We are a union within a union fighting for our children as we believe Education is a Civil Right!"

The Fight Back group has issued its demands, which include the removal of Emergency Manager Darnell Earley, more personnel and funding to guarantee clean and safe learning conditions and smaller class sizes as well as social services to address children "with alarming needs." They also demand the restoration of pay and benefits, including the nearly \$10,000 each teacher was forced to "loan" the district under the Termination Investment Plan (TIP) negotiated by the DFT in 2012.

By raising these demands, Detroit teachers are challenging the entire economic and political system, including both big-business parties, which have repudiated the fundamental democratic principle that all

children, regardless of their socioeconomic background, have the right to a high-quality public education.

After decades of budget cuts and the layoffs of thousands of teachers, engineers, janitors and other support staff, many schools are in a state of physical decay, making it impossible for students to learn. Teachers are circulating cellphone photos of collapsing ceilings and broken and leaking pipes. Students meanwhile complain of freezing in classrooms with no heat and having to protect themselves from falling ceiling tiles by putting textbooks over their heads.

Teachers are demanding the hiring of staff to repair boilers, restore heat and bring the schools up to federal EPA safety codes. This includes: removing black mold and mushrooms growing in classrooms, extermination of vermin and insects, the repair of leaking roofs, addressing poor air quality in buildings and providing adequate janitorial staff, soap and supplies for all DPS Schools.

Having long relied on the DFT, the United Auto Workers and other unions to suppress opposition by the working class in Detroit, the political establishment has been taken by surprise by the eruption of social protest. The DFT and its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), along with various officials in and around the Democratic Party, are scrambling to corral the movement and smother it.

On Tuesday Mayor Mike Duggan, accompanied by Michigan AFT President David Hecker, toured several schools and feigned shock over finding rodents and other unsanitary conditions. In fact, city and union officials have long ignored complaints by teachers, parents and students over the deplorable conditions in

the schools.

The leaders of the so-called Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren, which is made up of business interests like the Skillman Foundation, Democratic Party officials and union executives, posed as friends of the teachers, even though they are promoting a plan that will only further undermine public education and open it up to profitmaking interests.

Detroit NAACP president Wendell Anthony, who co-chairs the coalition, criticized Michigan's Republican governor, Rick Snyder, and the state legislature for dragging their feet on restructuring the school district. "Everybody knows things are bad, and getting worse. Where is the governor? Where is Lansing? When will the schoolchildren of Detroit get the help they so desperately need?"

The DFT, whose interim president Ivy Bailey is posturing as a supporter of the teachers while stating her opposition to the job actions, is holding a union meeting today that is expected to draw large numbers of teachers. AFT President Randi Weingarten is flying in from her Washington, DC office in an effort to break the resistance of teachers.

Weingarten, whose total compensation is \$543,150, oversaw the imposition of the 2012 Detroit labor agreement that stole \$10,000 from each teacher. The AFT president has colluded with and taken money from such enemies of public education as the Gates Foundation so that the AFT can be a partner in corporate-backed "school reform" measures. On Wednesday she tweeted that Mayor Duggan "is being responsive to our calls for help" in a transparent attempt to persuade teachers to stop their protests because they were "being listened to."

It would be a fatal mistake for teachers to believe the claims by the DFT and AFT that the Democrats are friends of teachers. Michigan's former Democratic governor, Jennifer Granholm, was the first to install an emergency manager over the Detroit schools in 2009. Democratic mayors from Coleman Young to David Bing carried out massive attacks on teachers and public education in order to provide tax breaks to the auto corporations and satisfy the demands of the Wall Street investors.

Moreover, under President Obama's Race to the Top scheme, cash-starved school districts were rewarded

with federal dollars if they gutted tenure rights, used test-based "accountability" and "value added" schemes to fire teachers, close so-called "failing schools" and funnel ever more public resources to for-profit charter school operators. Obama's Justice Department also directly intervened to block actions by retirees who were fighting to defend their pensions during the 2013-14 Detroit bankruptcy, which is being used as template for the attacks on DPS teachers.

These are precisely the conditions Detroit teachers are fighting now.

The Democrats and the Republicans are looting public education, just like they are looting the wages, health benefits and pensions of workers, in order to funnel even more money into the hands of the super-rich and for socially destructive purposes like war.

If there are any differences between the two big-business parties it is only over tactics. The Republicans are seeking to circumvent the trade unions, while the Democrats use the services of the AFT and other unions to accomplish the same reactionary agenda of attacks on teachers and school privatization.

The totally justifiable demands of the teachers deserve the support of educators and all workers throughout the metro Detroit area, nationally and internationally. The defense of public education is essential not only because it is a vital public service, but also because it is at the center of the fight for social equality, which is critical for every section of the working class. This is why teachers cannot be allowed to fight this battle alone.



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