

Detroit teachers and the political struggle for public education

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The courageous protests by Detroit teachers have exposed before the world the deplorable conditions in the city's schools, which are the result of the relentless war being waged against public education by both big business political parties.

Rank-and-file teachers have taken their own initiative and acted independently of every faction of the Detroit Federation of Teachers and political establishment in Detroit and Lansing. After decades of phony promises by Democrats and Republicans, and endless concessions imposed by the DFT and AFT in the name of "saving the schools," teachers decided to take matters in their own hands and begin a fight to defend public education.

The coordinated job actions carried out in defiance of the threats by the governor, the emergency manager and the corporate-controlled media, and the opposition of the DFT, have inspired workers all over the country and the world. There is a new mood of militancy and social protest in the working class, which has gotten no relief in the supposed "economic recovery" that has only benefited the big corporations and the super-rich.

At today's union meeting, rank-and-file teachers must resist the efforts by AFT President Randi Weingarten, Michigan AFT officials and both factions of the DFT, Ivy Bailey's and Steve Conn's, to smother their struggle with claims that Mayor Duggan, Governor Snyder and state and local politicians are "finally listening" to teachers' concerns.

On the contrary, the legislation is being drawn up in Lansing today to force through a bipartisan reorganization of DPS modeled on the "Grand Bargain" during the Detroit bankruptcy. This is the response to the powerful movement of teachers. As in the city bankruptcy, here too, the unions and both big business parties are doing the bidding of the financial

powers that be and wealthy bondholders seeking privatization and business opportunities. Teachers should be warned: their pensions and health care benefits will also be put on the chopping block.

These are the same forces—Snyder, EM Darnell Earley and politicians from both the Democratic and Republican parties—responsible for the lead poisoning of the children of Flint.

Snyder has reportedly agreed to 85 percent of the plan drawn up by the Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren, which is made up of business interests like the Skillman Foundation, Democratic Party officials and union executives. Their plan will only further undermine public education and open it to profitmaking interests.

This is demonstrated by the fact that Snyder's liaison with the Coalition has been Paul Pastorek, the former state superintendent of Louisiana schools responsible for completely charterizing the New Orleans schools. The plan was also prepared in consultation with US Judge Steven Rhodes who imposed the city bankruptcy and overturned the state constitutional protection of public employee pensions.

Under the plan, Duggan and Snyder will appoint a new school board and an elected school board would be put in place by 2017. However, this pretense of democracy is belied by the fact that the same unelected Financial Review Commission with dictatorial powers over spending decisions for the city will be put in charge of the DPS schools. These institutions will answer not to the teachers, parents and students, but to the banks and big bondholders.

Rank-and-file teachers have raised essential demands, including smaller class sizes, social services to address alarming levels of student poverty, adequate staffing and resources to repair schools and guarantee a safe and

clean learning environment. They also call for adequate prep time, an end to punitive “accountability” schemes, the repayment of TIP money and improved wages and health care benefits.

The fact is these wholly legitimate demands are opposed by the entire economic and political establishment—in Detroit, Lansing and Washington, DC. The politicians, from Obama to Hillary Clinton and Snyder to Duggan, all insist there is “no money,” even as both parties hand trillions to Wall Street and the Pentagon’s war machine.

AFT President Randi Weingarten is at today’s meeting as a representative not of teachers but the corporate-backed “school reformers” the AFT has partnered with.

Weingarten—whose salary is \$543,000—has long collaborated with enemies of public education like the Gates Foundation. She blackmailed Detroit teachers into accepting the TIP robbery in 2012 and has suppressed every expression of opposition to the closing of schools, teacher layoffs and privatization.

She is the closest political ally of President Obama, whose Race to the Top scheme rewarded cash-starved districts for destroying tenure and using test-based “accountability” schemes to scapegoat teachers, shut down so-called failing schools and funnel billions to for-profit charter operations.

The struggle for education is at the center of the fight for social equality. It is a struggle against a failed economic and political system, capitalism, that subordinates the most elemental needs of the population for education, clean water, good-paying jobs, health care and pensions, to the further enrichment of the corporate and financial aristocracy that rules America. Drunk with wealth and power, the ruling elite and their political representatives have repudiated the basic democratic principle that every child, regardless of socioeconomic background has the right to a high-quality education.

To oppose the gang-up teachers must reach out for the broadest political support. Their allies are not phony friends in the corporate-controlled Democratic Party but the tens of millions of working class people in Metro Detroit, the US and internationally who want to defend public education and every other social right.

The teachers’ protests, coming on the heels of the near rebellion by Ford, Fiat Chrysler and GM workers

against the UAW, are a sign of the growing mood of militancy and social protest by workers in the US and internationally.

Everything must be done to build up the greatest unity of the working class. This means rejecting claims that this is a racial issue, or Detroit vs. suburbs. Such canards are used to divide workers, isolate Detroit teachers and tie them to the coattails of the corrupt Democratic Party establishment in Detroit.

Such a divisive policy has long been the stock in trade of supposed “union dissident” Steve Conn and his organization, By Any Means Necessary. The provocative antics of Conn are actually utterly conformist—he covers up for the role of local Democrats and insists teachers accept the dictatorial authority of the DFT. But the teachers’ struggle shows that real progress can only be made when teachers break through the stranglehold of this discredited organization and take independent action linking their struggles with the whole working class.

This fight must be expanded through the organization of rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood to unite teachers, parents, students and other sections of workers to defend public education. An appeal must be issued to the working people of Detroit, the state of Michigan, the US and internationally to support this struggle.

The central issue facing the working class is the necessity for a political struggle to break the stranglehold of the corporate and financial elite and redistribute society’s wealth to vastly improve public education and other vital social services. For that teachers and all workers need to build their own mass political party, independent of the Democrats and Republicans, to fight for the socialist reorganization of society.



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