

Democrats and unions scramble to contain Detroit teacher protests

Nancy Hanover
18 January 2016

The emergence last week of coordinated teacher protests in Detroit, organized independently of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), came as a shock to state and local authorities, the news media and the trade union apparatus. Having long relied on the DFT and other unions to suppress opposition to the decimation of public education and other essential services, there was a clear disorientation in the official response, which varied between denunciations and phony claims of sympathy.

Three straight days of “sick outs” led to the shutdown of 93 of the district’s 97 schools. Teachers used social media to expose the intolerable conditions in their decaying schools and to demand increased staffing and resources to lower class sizes, address chronic poverty among schoolchildren and recoup years of lost wages and benefits negotiated by the DFT.

Within leading corporate and political circles there was fear the spreading protests and open defiance by teachers of the union and legislators’ threats of fines and dismissal could become the catalyst for a far broader movement of the working class. Detroit has been the epicenter for the attacks on the working class, including the 2013-14 bankruptcy when both parties, with the full support of the unions, looted city worker pensions and public assets on behalf of Wall Street bondholders. In nearby Flint social anger is at a boiling point over the lead poisoning of the water supply—by the very same emergency manager overseeing the Detroit schools—and late last year thousands of autoworkers engaged in a near rebellion against the pro-company contracts pushed through by the United Auto Workers.

Every section of the political establishment—from Republican Governor Rick Snyder and the Republican-controlled state legislature, to the Democrats, including Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, city and state officials, all the way up to President Obama—are hostile to the teachers’ demands. All of them defend the “right” of the banks, wealthy bondholders, and for-profit education businesses to decimate public education and teachers’ living standards.

After recovering from their initial shock, the enemies of

teachers regrouped and began a counter-assault last week. This included:

*On Wednesday, January 13, Judge Steven Rhodes—notorious for his role in imposing the Detroit city bankruptcy by voiding the state constitutional protection for city workers’ pensions—began working out of Governor Snyder’s office, meeting with dozens of Republican House members to assist in gaining support for reorganization legislation.

Politicians have seized upon the announcement two weeks ago that DPS debt will balloon to \$26.8 million a month, and now the teachers’ effective protests, to ram through the reorganization efforts, which have been stymied in the state legislature since last spring.

*Also on January 13, Mayor Duggan announced that all DPS schools were to be inspected by the end of April, claiming—for the first time—that if violations are found, the city would take “appropriate steps” to rectify them.

*On Thursday, January 14, Michigan state senator Goeff Hansen (R-Hart) introduced Senate Bills 710 and 711 for the purpose of legally dissolving the Detroit Public Schools, establishing a new Detroit Community School District directly under the thumb of the Michigan Treasury and a financial control board appointed by the governor and mayor.

The legislation would create a Detroit Education Commission, appointed by the mayor and governor, which would hire a chief education officer with dictatorial control over school openings and closures. One revision made since the original proposal last April calls for the existing Financial Review Commission created under the Detroit bankruptcy to also have fiscal oversight of the old and new districts instead of creating a new oversight panel.

*The same day, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers union—the DFT’s parent union—flew into town to address a mass meeting of angry and militant teachers, many of whom were looking for the sanctioning of a strike. While feigning support, Weingarten opposed a strike authorization vote. Instead, she said the

AFT would be buying a full page ad in the local newspaper, launching a petition to emergency manager Darnell Earley and Governor Snyder calling for the “full funding” of Detroit schools, and holding a meaningless “protest” at the Detroit Auto Show. When these toothless proposals were met by hostility, Weingarten began interrupting and shouting over teachers who were attempting to speak.

*On Friday, January 15, the hypocritical attempts at damage control continued from additional corners. State Superintendent of Education Brian Whiston met with Earley and other district officials, purportedly to encourage teachers to “report problems to principals,” something teachers have, of course, done for a very long time. This suggestion was then hailed by David Hecker, president of the American Federation of Teachers-Michigan, who applauded Whiston for “prioritizing Detroit.” Hecker added, “We look forward to positive outcomes from their meeting. ... They are desperately needed and needed now.”

*Most seriously, in fact of critical importance to the Democrats and Republicans in Lansing—finance industry experts in *The Bondbuyer* noted on Friday that Moody’s has labeled Snyder’s proposed restructuring “credit positive.” The publication approvingly reports that, “Under the proposal, the former DPS entity would remain intact to continue collecting tax revenue until its debt is repaid. Those debts include \$1.5 billion of unlimited general obligation bonds, \$199 million in borrowing from the state’s School Loan Revolving Fund, and \$259 million in limited GO [General Obligation] debt paid by district operating revenues, rather than a dedicated debt service levy.”

The chief aim of the reorganization is to secure the interests of the hedge fund owners and investors in municipal bonds. As in the bankruptcy of Detroit, the ruling elite is overseeing the transfer of huge resources from the working class to the banks, in this case through the destruction of public education. “The state sends its checks to the district after holding out money to repay short-term borrowings. Whatever is left is available to pay teachers, buy books and turn on the lights,” explained the Citizen Research Council.

“It’s upsetting to see the poor conditions of the Detroit school system, but as bondholders, we are largely insulated because of the strong support provided to the bonds by the state,” explained Paul Mansour, the head of Conning’s municipal research which oversees \$11 billion of state and local debt, including some of Detroit’s.

The reorganization of Detroit schools envisioned by Senate Bills 710 and 711 will not just “insulate” the bondholders, it will enforce the drastic shrinking of the public schools, the further impoverishment of teachers and other school workers, and the elimination of school services,

all to more firmly secure the debt. As the bill’s sponsor pointed out, “We want to establish stringent academic standards and **strict financial measures** [emphasis added] in the city’s public school system. That is our goal in this legislative process.”

An inseparable part of this effort is growing the for-profit education business sector in the city. That this is also a major goal of the legislation was demonstrated when the main spokesperson for the charter school industry in Michigan, Dan Quisenberry, signaled his approval of the legislation, calling it “a step in the right direction.”

For tactical reasons, the hated emergency manager will be removed, but Wall Street and other corporate interests will maintain their dictatorial hold. The state will impose its fiscal control and increasing privatization on the new Detroit Community District in several ways. This will take place first through an interim nine-member school board appointed by the governor and mayor. Second, the appointed school board will hire the superintendent of schools who cannot be removed even once an elected board takes office in January 2017. Most fundamentally, the city’s financial review commission will have complete oversight powers over spending. Finally, the bottom 5 percent of schools will be entirely under the direction of a state-appointed CEO, which it appears could either continue the hated Education Achievement Authority or potentially turn it into charters.

Reportedly, the legislation does not address a source of funding for the \$515 million in short-term debt.

The conspiracy by both big business parties, the financial aristocracy and the unions can only be defeated if rank-and-file teachers fight to mobilize the full strength of the working class—in metro Detroit and throughout the US and internationally—to conduct a common fight to defend public education and other social rights. For their part, autoworkers and other workers should follow the example of teachers by organizing their struggles independently of and in opposition to the trade unions.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact