

“We are not happy with the union. We finally acted independently”

Detroit teachers determined to continue fight

Our reporters
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Over the weekend, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Detroit teachers about the issues in their struggle. Last week, teachers conducted three straight days of “sick out” protests that forced the closure of 92 of the district’s 97 schools.

Rank-and-file teachers organized the job actions independently of the Detroit Federation of Teachers to demand the removal of the state-appointed emergency manager and adequate staffing and resources to repair decaying school buildings, lower class sizes and provide social services to children facing chronically high levels of poverty. Teachers also insisted on the return of wage givebacks negotiated by the DFT and the protection of their health and pension benefits.

A young teacher who has been active in the protests told the WSWS, “With the sickouts and the social media coverage, there is now overwhelming support for teachers. It’s been kind of surreal. The dynamic has changed so much. The question now is how to use this attention effectively.

“Teachers are now on the front lines. We waited a long time for effective leadership. It was a debacle last year. But now members are finding their way to each other. They are realizing that it is not just this or that building. Some of the younger teachers had been involved in the Occupy protests and have experience with grassroots organizing.

“We posted the pictures of the buildings first. It was a smart move. Of course the photos were shocking and they’ve gone all over the Internet. It was like opening Pandora’s box. We’re trending on Facebook and Twitter.

“But now we’re concerned that the more serious issues are not getting the traction they deserve. We have huge class sizes, 40 plus, a teacher shortage running as many as 200 missing teachers, there is privatized staffing and Teach for America.

“But we fear that the legislation being introduced is an emergency manager system with a different name. We’re

terrified of that. That includes the coded language promoted by the Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren. Will there be a board that decides to open and close schools?

“Everyone has an agenda, an angle. How do we know who to trust? This is highly political and we’re not political ourselves.

“If the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT)/American Federation of Teachers (AFT) plan active events, we’ll participate. But if they don’t move forward, we will still organize and hope they support us. But we’re not waiting.

“Most of us have devoted ourselves to the kids and we don’t understand why our ‘allies’ have betrayed us. How can the union be allowing or even supporting charter schools?

“We are hopeful, we are strong, but are we strong enough to go against all the entities we are coming up against? It’s been shocking how deep the corruption goes, but things are becoming clear to us. Money talks. As for the Democrats and Republicans, I’m the third box ‘common sense.’ They’re not two parties, they’re one party and a lot of people feel that way.

“We need to align ourselves with everyone in this, with other workers. For example, the building engineers have told us there are unmanned boilers in the schools and the students are in danger.”

A veteran teacher with the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) also talked to the WSWS about the challenges teachers face and the political experiences they are making in the fight to defend public education.

“It’s horrendous what’s going on. They are not able to retain teachers. It’s not just in my building; my friends in other buildings tell me the same thing. People are leaving the DPS in droves—even to work at Walmarts or factories because they are tired of all the demands.

“The authorities claim we have ‘low enrollment’ but you can’t prove it by the classrooms—with 45 and 50 children in elementary school classrooms.

“We are expected to give test after test. But our school has no social studies teacher, the math teacher left and so did the science teacher. There are substitutes running all of these classes. The kids just get worksheets. They learn no study skills. They don’t care about these kids, black or white.

“There are failing ceiling tiles in my room. I am sure there is asbestos in the building.”

Describing the impoverished conditions of large numbers of Detroit school children, she continued, “Most of these kids spend two or three different days with different relatives. They have no heat because their mom’s checks can’t go that far. My kids are telling me this all the time. Things like, they did their homework but forgot it at their grandmothers. They are travelling around all the time because they have no heat.

“Then there are kids who come to school smelling of kerosene. These kids probably have neither heat nor water at home. I bring in soap, deodorant, towels and sanitary pads for my kids, and tell them ‘Come see me privately and I’ll take care of you.’ I’ve been doing this for years.

“Kids tell me how they take an extension cord from one neighbor’s house to their own home so that they have light. They are using ice and coolers to store their food. I didn’t know kids lived like this, until I came to DPS!

“Last week the AFT people came to our building and said, ‘We’re here to organize.’ I said, ‘Organize what?’ Well, they wanted us to attend the union meeting that took place Thursday.

“So I went along with many others. We went there to prepare to strike—that’s what teachers thought would happen. The sickouts have unified us and we are not stopping. [Governor] Rick Snyder is shaking in his boots. It’s us and the water crisis in Flint—their plans aren’t going as planned.

“We went to the meeting but the union didn’t call a strike. We listened to that mess [AFT President] Randi [Weingarten]. I think these ‘organizers’ are here to demolish the district. Randi basically didn’t even wait for teachers to finish their questions and she really didn’t like the direction of the discussion at the meeting. Instead of a strike, she organized a petition calling for funding the Detroit schools. We signed it, but we couldn’t care less about this.

“[DFT interim president] Ivy Bailey tried to take credit for the sickouts but she was never for them. In fact, she put it on the web site that teachers should get doctor’s notes for missing days—but I know that it’s in the contract that we don’t need a doctor’s note unless we are out for

more than four days. I know for a fact that Bailey has been having tea with [emergency manager] Darnell Earley behind closed doors.

The WSWS asked what the teacher thought about Weingarten’s question in the union meeting “Are you here for Earley or for Lansing?” in which she tried to deflect criticism of the Democrat EM Darnell Earley and divert teachers’ anger solely against the Republican governor. She said, “We were there for both! It doesn’t matter, Democrat or Republican—it’s all about the money game.

“In fact, this is what I’ve been trying to explain to teachers. My friend admitted that after the meeting her eyes were opened. She had thought the union was for us. Many thought we’d be on strike the next day.

“This has been happening for a while. I’d say since 2006 the union has gone to the dogs. [Former DFT president] Keith Johnson was paid under the table. They started taking gains from the workers, making them pay for the health care and getting no raises. It used to be that after Christmas, we’d come back to work and the floors were all shiny and refinished. Now they’re swept and mopped, that’s it.

“They claimed the Democrats were supposed to be for us. And [Democratic former governor] Jennifer Granholm brought in [emergency manager] Robert Bobb. He carried through more cuts and layoffs and scared people. I’ve never made the money I did before 2009.

“We are not happy with the union. We finally acted independently. We should have done it in 2009, but we are doing it now. The parents are backing us. We have the kids coming in and telling us that they’re ‘for us.’ That’s coming from their homes.

“Barack Obama did nothing for working people. Did they really save the UAW people from bankruptcy? I don’t think about what they say, but what they *don’t* say. My family came up from the South and my dad voted Democratic all his life and even he says ‘Obama has done nothing for me.’ We are going backwards.”

The author recommends:

<http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2016/01/15/teac-j15.html>



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