

# Union officials work with Obama administration to crush Detroit teacher protests

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Fearing a continuation of the “sick out” protests by teachers that shut down nearly the entire Detroit Public Schools system last week, the interim president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers sent out an email yesterday to DFT members urging them to stop further resistance.

Angered over the long years of DFT collusion with the attack on public education, rank-and-file teachers took matters into their own hands and organized the job actions independently of the union. Defying state threats of fines and decertification, the teachers used social media to expose deplorable school conditions and demand the restoration of wages and benefits given away by the DFT.

The rebellion provoked fear in top echelons of the government all the way to the Obama administration, which were concerned that unauthorized protests could trigger a far broader movement of social opposition in the city, which has been a center of the corporate-government attack on autoworkers, public employees, pensioners and other sections of the working class. Sixty miles away in Flint, social anger has erupted over the lead poisoning of the city’s largely poor population and the coverup by Governor Rick Snyder and local officials.

With rank-and-file teachers planning more sickouts this week and protests at the Detroit Auto Show Wednesday where Obama is expected to hail the “return of Detroit,” state and local Democrats, along with national and state leaders from the DFT’s parent union, the American Federation of Teachers, have carried out a full-court press to smother the protests.

Last Thursday, AFT President Randi Weingarten, a close ally of Obama, feigned support for the teachers during a local union meeting and then promptly prevented a vote on strike action, which teachers expected. Instead she promoted a toothless petition campaign, newspaper ads and other publicity stunts, and then shouted down teachers opposing these self-defeating tactics.

In the letter to the members, DFT President Ivy Bailey

wrote, “We have reached out to the Obama Administration and conversations started on Saturday to brief them on the conditions, low and frozen salaries, the debt and frustrations. We’re continuing to speak to key Obama Administration members, and the president will arrive in Detroit this week having been briefed on our issues. We will keep you updated on any developments.”

As one veteran teacher aptly responded, “Obama knows all about Detroit; he sent [former Education Secretary] Arne Duncan here. All they want us to do is stop fighting so they don’t look bad while they do NOTHING. The Mayor, Obama and his administration have done NOTHING FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION. Snyder, [AFT President] Randi Weingarten and [former DFT President] Keith Johnson are all working together to fatten their pockets.”

Indeed, Arne Duncan infamously declared in 2009 that Detroit was “ground zero for education in this country,” and could soon “leapfrog” New Orleans, which has since become an all charter-school district. Obama has gone far beyond his Republican predecessor in attacking teacher tenure and using test-based “accountability” schemes to scapegoat and fire teachers, justify the closing of thousands of so-called failing schools and vastly expand the number of for-profit charter operations.

In the letter from the DFT president, Bailey tries to patronize teachers telling them that their actions—which she publicly opposed—had shone a national spotlight on the conditions in the schools and allowed people across the country “to hear the voices of Detroit teachers who are fed up.” She claims “progress” has been made in the last 48 hours “that will move us closer to winning the fight for stronger neighborhood public schools.”

And what is the progress?

The first is the earth-shaking development that the hated Emergency Manager Darnell Earley has agreed to meet with DFT officials on January 25! Bailey acknowledges that for the past month, the DFT has been holding behind-the-scenes

meetings with Earley to beg him for some bones to pacify opposition. Their meager demands include reinstatement of prep time, a return to one-hour faculty meetings instead of two, and a return to previous sick leave policies.

She acknowledges that this does not address the lost wages and benefits, which have driven teachers into financial ruin. Nevertheless, she says, the union is “eagerly awaiting a response from the district” on whether Earley will “meet our initial demands prior to the meeting as a good faith demonstration of his willingness to work with us.”

The only “good faith” Earley has is his faith that the DFT will do anything he tells them to. The DFT has collaborated with every emergency manager since former Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm appointed the first financial dictator in 2009. Since then thousands of teachers have lost their jobs while the rest have suffered a 123.5 percent increase in health care premiums and copay and prescription costs since 2009 and a decade-long freeze on pay and step increases. To add insult to injury, in 2010-2011, in an agreement drafted up by Randi Weingarten, the DFT forced teachers to “loan” the district \$9,000 in 2010-11. As a reward, former DFT President Keith Johnson was made one of Weingarten’s highly paid national vice presidents.

Bailey heaps praise on Mayor Mike Duggan, a ruthless “turnaround specialist” who destroyed the jobs and wages of hospital workers before making millions by selling his share of the Detroit Medical Center. He also played a key role in the Detroit bankruptcy and has since handed over much of the city to billionaire real estate speculators.

“On Saturday, DFT leaders, support staff, teachers—including a group of teacher activists from Robeson, and several principals met with Mayor Mike Duggan and a DPS official to talk about how to get our schools on track and about fair and equitable pay. The mayor—while asking us to keep educators in school and fight that way—has expressed strong support for teachers...”

All of this is aimed at saying, “Don’t take further action because this would only alienate our friends—Duggan, Obama, and maybe Mr. Earley—who are working so hard on the behalf of teachers.” This is utter nonsense. Under bills now being drafted in the state legislature, Governor Snyder and Duggan will appoint a new school board which will be under the thumb of the same unelected Financial Review Commission that has dictatorial control over city spending. Even when another school board is elected in 2017, financial power will remain be in the hands of the commission, which will guarantee that wealthy bondholders continue to reap their money at the expense of teachers, parents and students.

In other words it will be emergency management without an emergency manager.

The elemental demands of the teachers—for adequate

staffing and resources to repair school buildings, reduce class sizes and address chronic poverty among school children, for the restoration of lost wages and the protection of health and pension benefits—are opposed by every section of the corporate and political establishment. That is because the fight for the right to quality public education challenges the capitalist system, which subordinates the most basic social needs to the rapacious drive of the super-rich to increase their personal fortunes.

The allies of teachers in this fight are not the corporate-controlled politicians and corrupt union officials but the masses of workers in Metro Detroit, throughout the US and internationally who share the same interest in ending social inequality.

In taking the initiative independently of the DFT, teachers have pointed the way forward for every section of workers. But such a struggle can only be taken forward if it is also waged independently of and in opposition to all the false friends in the Democratic Party, which are no less the enemies of public education and teachers than the Republicans.

“The sick outs were long overdue,” a 28-year teaching veteran told the *World Socialist Web Site*. ““We had to take measures because we couldn’t get the response we needed from the union. Now the AFT national leader comes in at the 11th hour and tells us to ‘slow it down’! We have the momentum now, on the contrary, we should ramp it up. This is everybody’s fight. If everyone went out just one time to show our unity that would be important. We have to fight tooth and nail for a decent livelihood.”



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