“This isn’t just our fight, it’s for public education across the country.”

Detroit teachers denounce legal witch-hunt

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On Monday 200 students, parents and teachers rallied in front of the Michigan Court of Claims to oppose the efforts by the emergency manager of Detroit Public Schools (DPS) to criminalize the teacher sickouts.

Despite enormous pressure from school officials, hundreds of students at Cass Tech, Renaissance and Communication and Media Arts high schools also walked out of school as well in a spirited display of support for teachers. Many carried handmade signs.

Well aware of the deep support for teachers and the bogus evidence concocted by the district to victimize the teachers, Judge Cynthia Diane Stephens rejected the appeal for a temporary restraining order and tossed out a legal action against individual teachers.

After the hearing, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several of the 23 teachers fighting the legal witch-hunt by Emergency Manager Darnell Earley.

Sarah Jardine, named in the complaint, is a teacher of Adapted Physical Education for Students with Autism. Her open letter appealing for support from DPS parents helped galvanize support for the teachers. She told the WSWS she was relieved there was a “temporary” reprieve from legal action. Explaining the anti-democratic methods used by the district to select teachers in the lawsuit, she said, “They used statements we made in the media against us and plucked them out of the news. They used our free speech against us.

“The problem is we have no ability to bring our concerns to anyone at this point. We have no democratically elected school board. We’re under emergency management, and when they don’t hear us, there really is no other option for us than to do something in protest that is dramatic so that the people can hear our concerns—they certainly aren’t being heard by the emergency manager.

They took the open letter from Pam [Namyslowski] and my letter and decided to use them against us. Pam got a personal visit by Darnell Earley to her classroom to meet her. Five days later he used the letter she had written to sue her. So obviously they are not acting in good faith. Everything they do seems to be for PR and media spin. But, for our part, we’re acting on behalf of the kids.”

Commenting on the fact that teachers initiated the fight independently of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), she said, “Teachers decided to move in a grassroots way. They tried to use 23 individual teachers as a way to scare more than 3,000 of us. The truth is, those people named were just plucked out of 3,000. This is not something that you can attribute to any leader but really the people of the Detroit Public Schools—the teachers and the staff rising up.

“They just wanted to use us as an example to silence opposition. I hope this helps the district understand that is a bad methodology. This is not a movement of just 22-23 people. This is a movement of 3,000 and it will continue.

“To put the same emergency manager who was over Flint now over the Detroit schools is a colossal mistake. Snyder has still not removed him or made him resign. He is still in power.

“This isn’t just our fight. It’s a fight for public education across the country. We are standing in the gap. We are a large district and they are doing this to smaller districts, too. We have a lot of teachers in other districts standing in solidarity with us, they are learning you have to stand up and have your voices heard.

“Last week, Republican state legislator Tim Kelley

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wrote an op-ed in the *Detroit Free Press* that he would only support a school restructuring plan that bailed us out, but also made us privatized. I think the entire public education system we have is under threat for privatization, for our students to be profit-making instead of having their right to a free and appropriate education, especially students with disabilities."

Erika Jones, another defendant, said she was upset about the entire case. "This is definitely harassment. Who is paying for all of this?

"At Cass Tech I taught for 16 years, I also taught at Osborn and King, so I am a product of DPS.

"I am frustrated. This hearing is a waste of money, a waste of time. It's all because we want him [Darnell Earley] to tell us where is the money for the district. It has obviously been siphoned out, split up among the charter schools.

"We have questions about our pensions. I want to know where the money is. We can spend money for this [the hearing] and he can spend money for legal counsel. They were not prepared. They didn't have adequate witnesses. The judge looked at them and said, 'What's the point of this?'"

Erika explained she is working but has an injury that requires therapy three times a week. "I missed my therapy this morning because of this case. We don't have the option of picking our health care anymore like we used to. I used to go to Providence Hospital. During my whole care I never had deductibles. I have serious questions about our health care at this point."

LaNice Adams-Billingslea is one of eight teachers at Diann Banks-Williamson, a special education middle school on Detroit's impoverished east side. It was reported earlier in the day that teachers at Banks-Williamson had carried out a sickout, but instead every one of Wilson's eight teachers had been summoned to appear at the hearing—resulting in closing the school.

Billingslea was charged with organizing a strike. On the contrary, Billingslea told the WSWS, she has been on sick leave since November 2015 at the insistence of her doctor. She stated that she did not encourage or engage in the sickout.

"This is slander," continued Billingslea. "My name has been slandered. What if I want to get a job somewhere else? My name is in the paper for joining a sickout. I have been sick, yes, but I have not participated in a sickout now, nor have I ever."

Billingslea, who was visibly angry while she spoke to reporters, was asked if this struggle had encouraged her to speak out. "Yes, it has encouraged me. The same with all of the teachers at Diann Banks. There are only eight teachers at the school, and half of the teachers are dealing with an illness" similar to her own.

Samantha Cunningham, parent of two children at DPS schools, was at the protest outside the court. "I'm here because the children need clean and safe conditions in the school in order to learn.

"I also believe the teachers deserve better pay for what they do. The schools are clearly overcrowded. The problem is that teachers can't teach with 30-40 kids in a classroom. The children can't get the attention they need to develop with that many kids.

"I have two kids at Bates Elementary School, one in the first grade and one in pre-K. The first-grader doesn't have books. It's January, they should have gotten books last August. I'm upset because you can't learn without the proper material."

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