

Detroit high school students stage walkouts to support teachers

E.P. Bannon
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Hundreds of Detroit high school students walked out of their classes Monday to oppose the legal persecution of teachers who have launched a series of “sickout” protests against deplorable conditions in the schools and years of pay and benefit cuts. Students at Cass Technical High School, Communication & Media Arts High School, and Renaissance High School all staged walkouts at various points during the day Monday.

The protests were timed to coincide with the court appearance of 23 rank-and-file teachers whom the district’s emergency manager accused of engaging in and encouraging “illegal strikes.” Emergency Manager Darnell Earley, who after overseeing the poisoning of Flint residents is decimating the Detroit Public Schools, hypocritically accused protesting teachers of harming students and showing no regard for their education.

A video of the Cass Tech walkout by student Trinere Bass can be seen [here](#).

By walking out of the schools, students demonstrated that it was their teachers who were championing their rights, not Earley and other authorities who have starved public education of funding, shut down hundreds of schools and funneled public money to for-profit charter operations. Like the protests by teachers, the walkouts by students erupted outside of the control of the Detroit Federation of Teachers and other unions, and were a further expression of the growing mood of social opposition and militancy in the working class.

Using social media to organize, students at Cass Tech originally planned to walk out of class at 8 a.m. Monday, but school officials launched a campaign of threats to intimidate them. School administrators warned that any student who participated in a proposed walkout would be suspended for five days and face possible additional disciplinary action.

Students defied administrators’ threats four hours

later, however, spilling out onto the street at noon. Students held up signs calling for support of the “Detroit 23” teachers facing a potential injunction for fighting to defend their students’ right to a quality public education. They also denounced teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms and the deterioration of school buildings.

School officials were quick to act against students handing out suspensions. “I got suspended for five days for an American [democratic] right,” one student told a Fox 2 Detroit television crew. “It’s ridiculous,” he continued.

On Tuesday a campaign team from the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) visited Cass Tech and spoke with students about the January 27 emergency meeting on the crisis in Flint and Detroit being held at Wayne State University. Both students and parents greeted campaigners with enthusiasm, expressing a desire to defend the rights of teachers and the working class as a whole.

Students waved SEP members to cross the street to give them leaflets and other literature and approached them with questions regarding the upcoming meeting.

Likewise, parents expressed strong support for DPS teachers and their students. While waiting to pick up their children from school, parents read leaflets and copies of the *WSWS Teachers’ Newsletter*, giving campaigners thumbs up, smiles and nods of approval. Students involved in the protests said they would send a delegation to the emergency meeting.

Detroit teachers took part in a wave of “sickouts” to protest the decrepit state of city schools. This culminated in the shutdown of virtually the entire school district on January 20, the same day President Obama visited Detroit. Teachers denounced and

documented roach and rat infestations, as well as the presence of black mold and mushrooms growing out of the walls.

In addition to the serious risks posed by these health hazards, they also pointed to overcrowded classrooms coupled with a lack of textbooks and other basic supplies. Because the Detroit Federation of Teachers has long collaborated with big-business politicians from both parties and successive emergency managers, the teachers took it upon themselves to commence a struggle by calling in sick en masse.

In an effort to curtail the opposition of teachers, national union officials from the American Federation of Teachers and Democratic Party officials, including Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, organized a tour of the schools and afterwards the mayor ordered health inspections.

The results of the city's inspections of 11 public schools "revealed widespread code violations, including multiple instances of rodents, mold, damaged roofs and broken glass," according to the *Detroit Free Press*. "City inspectors found 152 violations, an average of nearly 14 for each school. School officials will have about a month to make repairs."

Responding to the inspection results, Mayor Duggan adopted an angry pose, saying the city will take "prompt legal action to enforce compliance" if repairs aren't made on time. "A claim of a shortage of funds is not a defense to violations of building or health codes for any building owner. We're not going to allow our children, DPS employees, or the public to continue to be subjected to substandard conditions," the mayor claimed.

In fact, city and school officials have long known of these conditions and have done nothing about it. A report by local news outlet 7 Action News noted that Emergency Manager Darnell Earley said the story exposing conditions inside Spain Elementary-Middle School "was not news to him."

"People have known about the condition of Spain," said Earley, who toured the school last year. According to the news outlet, "He knew the roof was leaking, and told school workers not to use the gym where the roof was in the worst shape. The district didn't fix it, because it was planning to sell the property to the Detroit Medical Center."

After Earley claimed that the district would never

allow threats to the safety of students or school employees, teachers immediately exposed this lie, telling the news station that they had repeatedly contacted the Michigan Occupational Health and Safety Commission after staff was getting sick from the mold. After city inspectors found that the school was far from compliance, Earley told the station, "Code violations are not new to Detroit Public Schools."

Fearing that the growing opposition of teachers and students, along with Flint residents, could develop into a broader movement of the whole working class, the judge decided to temporarily delay any legal action against protesting teachers. However, if the DFT is unable to stop the protests, the full weight of the state, including injunctions, massive fines and the threat of jail, will be thrown at teachers.

While slandering teachers for "disrupting" their students academic progress, school officials had no compunction about suspending students for exercising their right to free speech. The action of the students in solidarity with their teachers no doubt strikes fear in the political establishment, given that teacher sickouts and student walkouts led to the mass demonstrations in Wisconsin in 2011.

Workers throughout the city should come to the defense of the students and demand their reinstatement and the expunging of any disciplinary measures from their records.

What is needed is a unified struggle of all workers to defend their social and democratic rights. This poses the need for the development of a political movement of the working class, independent of both big-business parties, to break the grip of the corporate and financial elites, and reorganize economic life based on the principle of social equality.



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