

“This is not a race issue—we need everyone to support this”

Detroit Public School students take a stand with teachers, spreading protests

Nancy Hanover
1 February 2016

Detroit Public Schools students have embraced the struggle of their teachers against unsafe and deteriorating schools, over-stuffed classrooms and inadequate pay. Following mass sickouts staged by teachers across the school district over the last two weeks, high school students have solidarized themselves with this struggle of educators.

The teachers’ struggle—which developed outside of the control of the union, in the face of the threat of injunctions and fines—has sparked widespread support and enthusiasm throughout Detroit and nationwide.

High school students have now begun organizing their own independent walkouts and demonstrations, even in the face of disciplinary threats by Detroit Public Schools (DPS) administrators. They have become outspoken in defending their teachers and affirming their own right to a decent education.

Walkouts took place on Monday, January 25, at Cass Technical High School, the Communication & Media Arts School (CMA), and Renaissance High School, on Wednesday at East English Village Preparatory Academy and on Friday at Martin Luther King Jr. High. The student protest on Monday was timed to coincide with the court appearance of 23 rank-and-file teachers being sued by DPS for their alleged role in the district-wide sickouts.

CMA principal Donya Odum vindictively suspended over 80 students for five days in retaliation for their action. But CMA student Antonio Willis told local news, “Since the teachers didn’t walk out on their own, we had to speak for them.”

Parents were largely horrified by the suspensions and strongly supported the protests by both the teachers and the students. “I think the students had to do this to

prove a point,” said parent Roselyn Coe. “My daughter has been telling me she can’t use the bathrooms because they aren’t suitable to use. She’s cold and has to keep her coat on most of the time in the classroom. I commend my daughter for taking a stand.”

The students’ suspensions were subsequently reduced to one day, but many were punitively turned away on Wednesday when they attempted to return. This prompted another protest outside the building. Dozens of parents showed up, trying to get their students back into school. They voiced their support to the students again. “It should encourage more adults to do the same thing,” said another parent, adding, “We don’t have enough adults that protest. To see the kids take a stand, that was good.”

On Friday, January 29, the protests spread to Martin Luther King High School, where students organized a lunchtime demonstration. “This is not a walkout, our lives matter, DPS lives matter,” students chanted marching outside the school.

DeMarcus, a junior at the school, told the WSWs why the students decided to join the growing protests.

“This was not a walkout, but it was a warning. If things don’t change, we will do more. We organized those students with fourth hour lunches and went out to demonstrate and tell the press how we feel. This was not violent, nor was it affiliated with By Any Means Necessary [the pseudo-left group BAMN]. We have a right to do what we did.

“Our problem is with our education. We have mice going through the halls. We have bedbugs and roaches. One day the temperatures are real hot and the next day there can be no heat. We aren’t allowed to wear our jackets because it’s against the student code of

conduct.

“We have 55 people in some classes, or 45 in some. It means we have to take desks from different classrooms and move them around at class-change. There are vacancies. The teachers aren’t getting paid and don’t have the right to stand up for their pay because strikes are illegal.

“I am a junior and we’ve been fighting this since I was in ninth grade. This is not just about us; it’s also the people coming after us. Each year there’s a new ninth grade and they shouldn’t have to worry about bringing bedbugs home from school with them.

“This isn’t just about King HS, it’s for all of DPS. What is the cure for this? More books, smaller class sizes, pay our teachers.

“It’s important, people need to know what is happening in DPS. Now is the time to stand up. Each day, each year, it’s getting worse.

“This is not a race issue. We have diverse schools like Western. It’s not about black, white or Hispanic. It’s about all of us coming together. We need everyone to support this—the whole community. It would take a whole country—countries in fact. It is not just America, but other countries too. I was amazed that your web site has whole sections on other countries. That is beautiful.”

DPS students also appeared on local television, emphasizing their determination to continue this struggle. The TV host of “Let It Rip” attempted to bait them: “You were suspended for five days for protesting and you want to go college. Won’t walking out hurt your record?”

Caley, an East English Prep Academy student, firmly stated, “No, I know the walkouts are to better our education, to better the schools, to better the Detroit Public Schools overall.” The host, attempting again, said, “Some people might say that these teachers who are getting sick are breaking the law.” Jordan, also from CMA, strongly countered, “They may not have the right to strike, but they have to have a way to voice their opinion.”

Terrance, another CMA student, also directed his response on the issue of legality: “If you attribute everything you do with what the law states or what the system says or the structures that have been in place, well personally I’d never feel proud of anything I did. What change did my actions bring? Negative or

positive? When we walked out of school, we made a change. We’re here because we have a voice,” he concluded.

A veteran teacher expressed her admiration of the students and their determination to join the struggle: “At my school, the children were also attempting to walk out. They were stopped at the door by security. They want to be part of what is going on. They talk in the classroom about this.

“When my room goes up to 90 degrees hot, I have to open the windows. Many students suffer from asthma and they have to walk into the hallway. Then the mice scurry through the hall. They try to catch them with the garbage cans.

“The issue is also that they don’t have teachers. The math teacher left and the students have only a substitute. They complain they are not getting the education. Instead of getting Algebra 3 or 4, they are left doing crossword puzzles. These are seniors and juniors and they don’t have a math teacher.

“Americans are just tired of this, you can see why Sanders is getting support—even Trump. People feel that they need anything but the status quo. There is no money for Flint, no money for special education. Title I funding is cut, but Obama brags in the State of the Union that America spends more on the military than the next eight countries combined.

“My students are becoming very political, trying to be a part of it, even though they are threatened with five-day suspensions.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact