

Politicians, unions use the “carrot and stick” to try to derail Detroit Public Schools struggle

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As Detroit teachers are joined by those in Chicago in the fight against layoffs, cuts in benefits, intolerable working conditions and the attack on public education, Democratic and Republican politicians, along with union officials, are going into high gear to try to block independent action by angry educators.

While this week’s announcement that Detroit Public Schools (DPS) emergency manager Darnell Earley has submitted his resignation, effective February 29, was welcomed by teachers, a sober assessment of the political challenges ahead is necessary.

Republican Governor Rick Snyder, facing the twin crises of lead poisoning in Flint and protests of teachers in Detroit, evidently opted to throw Earley overboard. This is an attempt to mollify growing public outrage directed at his increasingly discredited administration. In no way, however, did it signal a retreat in his efforts to ram through a bipartisan reorganization of Detroit schools that opens wide the floodgates for charters and education privatizers.

To that end, a whole series of reactionary political initiatives have been taken this week aimed at diverting, convincing, or coercing teachers who are fighting to defend public education and their own livelihoods.

Snyder’s first order of business was to line up two well-known political operatives as candidates for interim head of DPS. Both are Democrats with substantial track records in the service of big business politics, but who are considered more palatable to the unions and Democratic Party establishment.

They are Charlie Beckham—who went to jail for his 1984 conviction in bribe-taking as the city’s water and sewerage department director, and has worked for just about every Detroit mayor since Coleman Young—and Tonya Allen, president and CEO of the Skillman Foundation, a major corporate player involved in the education privatization business. As co-chair of the

Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren, Allen’s general agreement with the plans to dissolve the district along the lines recommended by the governor and his bipartisan collaborators is well known.

At the same time, the Michigan legislature is moving quickly against teachers. A series of measures have been put forward alongside the Earley resignation to criminalize teacher protests and suppress the independent initiative of rank-and-file educators.

On Wednesday, February 3, a vicious package of anti-strike legislation passed the Michigan Education Committee. The bills had been amended into an even more draconian version than originally proposed.

These nationally-unprecedented measures would subject teachers involved in “strike” activity to fines of \$5,000 a day and possible loss of pay, along with a possible two-year suspension of state teaching certification. They define “strike action” as at least one school employee “found to be engaging in the activity.” School districts that fail to enforce sanctions would be fined 5 percent of their total state school aid. Finally, in efforts to make absolutely sure the unions police the membership, the bill calls for the dissolution of a school’s bargaining unit and the union’s ineligibility to represent teachers for five years “whether or not it agreed to the strike.” Michigan law already prohibits teacher strikes.

On Thursday, hearings began in the state legislature’s Senate Committee on Government Operations on Governor Snyder’s restructuring plan, which would dissolve the DPS as an educational entity and set up a new Detroit Community Schools (DCS). The complete reconstitution of the district has long been the goal of privatizers.

While the exact scope and nature of the DCS will still be negotiated over the next few weeks, disputes between Michigan state Democrats and Republicans over the timing of school board elections and “local control” have

nothing to do with improving schools and restoring “democracy.” On the contrary, they are essentially a question of which party will control which positions of power and how the profits from the dismantling of public education will be divvied up.

Meanwhile, no matter who makes up the immediate school administration, a state-selected Financial Review Commission (FRC) will have dictatorial powers over spending, including all new contracts and collective bargaining agreements approved by the school board.

The mission of the FRC will be to impose further cost-cutting measures to satisfy bondholders and usher in additional for-profit education companies and charters. As the bills presently stand, the responsibility for \$1.5 billion of unfunded pension liabilities lies with the new district, which inevitably means that massive cuts and attacks on teachers’ pensions will follow.

Additionally, the FRC is to have jurisdiction until the Detroit schools have at least three consecutive years of deficit-free budgets and the ability to borrow independently in the municipal securities market—an impossible condition given diminishing state funding for education, the unfunded pension liabilities and countless other objective factors like antiquated buildings and infrastructure.

However, as educators and students face this frontal assault on the right to public education and basic rights, they face another enemy no less consciously opposed to their interests. At the very center of the conspiracy by the politicians to “convince” and “divert” teachers away from struggle is the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

After teachers conducted their independent campaign of sickouts—independent of the DFT—in January, interim president Ivy Bailey suddenly claimed that “the situation in the Detroit Public Schools is far worse than we ever imagined.” Bailey is a longtime union official and crony of former DFT president Keith Johnson, who worked for years to impose massive concessions upon the membership. She shares responsibility for overseeing the deterioration of learning conditions.

Unable to stop the escalating protests on her own, Bailey called in AFT operative Ann Mitchell to oversee the local, and AFT President Randi Weingarten to address the membership and work behind the scenes with the Obama administration to undermine the protests. As a result of more sophisticated advice, the DFT has now launched a lawsuit over school conditions, brought in

their own building inspectors and organized a series of public relations stunts.

These events are attempts at winning back teacher loyalty with a pretense of concern. Last weekend, the union organized a “Labor to Neighbor” series of walks near schools, which will be further embellished next week into a Tuesday “Day of Action” including a “walk-in” (teachers and parents are to walk to their schools next Tuesday and “garner support for teachers”), topped off with an “Interfaith Candlelight Vigil and Unity Rally.”

None of these impotent actions can—nor are they designed to—stop the very advanced plans in the state of Michigan to criminalize teachers’ protests and utilize the DPS debt to impose a reorganization of the district favorable to the charters and privatizers at the expense of teachers and students.

Far from representing teachers, the DFT/AFT has worked every step of the way with the Democrats—like Earley, former emergency managers (all Democrats), Arne Duncan and the Obama administration—in imposing pro-corporate education reform, only seeking to ensure that they have a seat at the table and a portion of the spoils.

The unions have sought at all costs to keep teachers politically shackled to the Democratic Party, which under Obama has overseen the destruction of more than 300,000 teaching jobs, has cut federal aid to education under Title I and has used the full power of the Education Department to promote charter schools and private education businesses. As it did during the Detroit bankruptcy, the role of the Democratic Party, no less than the Republicans, is to enforce the dictates of the hedge fund managers and bondholders.

To defend public education, it is necessary for teachers to continue their independent initiatives, break from the unions and the two big business political parties, form rank-and-file committees in every school and link the struggle to defend education with the struggles of workers throughout the country.



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