

“It’s not just a fight for teachers or students, it’s a fight for education”

Detroit Public Schools students launch protests to demand quality education

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Protests against the attack on education in Detroit continued Wednesday, February 10, as students across the school district walked out or called in sick to show support for the struggle begun by teachers.

Last month, Detroit Public Schools (DPS) teachers defied their union leadership and launched a series of “sickout” protests, which generated popular support both locally and nationally. The bold actions by educators called attention to years of draconian budget cuts and pay and benefit concessions. Teachers took to social media to expose dangerous and dilapidated school buildings, left to rot by a series of emergency managers appointed by both Republican and Democratic governors.

The young people and parents chose their latest protest to coincide with “Count Day,” the semi-annual school day used to determine state funding for the district. DPS officials try to generate the highest attendance on the count days in October and February—offering special meals for parents and students, games and other incentives. Ten percent of the state’s foundation grant is allocated based on the district enrollment on February Count Day, although missing students will be counted if they report normally within 10 days.

At Martin Luther King, Jr. High School between 45-50 students walked out to protest conditions. Student leaders talked to the *World Socialist Web Site* about their cause. “The walkout was a success,” said DeMarcus. “We came together and united. We walked to the Church of the Messiah. We are going to continue to fight because it’s just not about us, the people in

school now. We’ll continue to college and life, but what about the next generation and their right to a quality education?

“We need new textbooks, smaller class sizes and more quality teachers. It’s not just King, it’s all of DPS.

“We’ve been trying to get the officials to deal with it, but we’re seeing how much value we have in their eyes. It’s terrible. The schools could run out of money by April.

“There are rodents and there is no pest control. On the outside there are some new buildings like King and Cass, but on the inside it’s bad. It’s either too hot or too cold.

“Our teachers are missing their money. They have given up not hundreds of dollars, but thousands of dollars.

“In most of my classes we don’t use books because there aren’t enough. There aren’t even enough to share each book between two people. So there are less than half the books we need. Even the books we do have are missing pages and have graffiti all over them. You cannot even read them. Stories are ripped out. We’re talking about really old books that go back to when our school was Eastern—that old! [Eastern HS was renamed Martin Luther King Jr. HS in 1969].

“I have no books in world history, Algebra II, vocals and student government. In my main structured class, physics, we have no books and have to download the material online. Most of the work is from the book. It’s one of the hardest classes and they have no money for books.

“The school used to give out netbooks. They weren’t very nice, but now they don’t even do that anymore. Teachers give out worksheets, handouts and show material on the board.

“It’s crazy that they spend millions of dollars on big airplanes and military aircraft but education, which costs just a couple of million, is left out.

“We are fighting for our DPS education, for victory. It’s not just a fight for teachers, it’s not just a fight for students, it’s a fight for education.”

Kamari—also a student leader at King—continued, “We are fighting for everybody—the King way, that’s our namesake school.

“We went to vocals class today and there was a note, which said the room was too cold. It said we’d have to go the King Center. We walked out. There is no way public schools should have no heat—it is always either too cold or too warm. About 45-50 of us walked out.

“We have extremely big class sizes, 50-55 in a room. How can you teach in a big class like that, and kids have behavior problems? I have big classes for art, math, English...mostly all my classes. They’re overcrowded, enormous.

“As I said on [the local TV news show] ‘Let It Rip’, student voices should matter.”

“We the students,” a group at Cass Tech, also backed the protests. The evening before, student Kyle King addressed the candlelight vigil at the school. “I go to Cass Tech high school, I’m 15 and I’m in the tenth grade. I love all the teachers here.

“Cass Tech has issues too just like Spain Elementary—elevator problems, class sizes. There are only 39 books so kids cannot get homework. When we go home, we have to get it online. Our teachers have to stay late every day. They stay past six or seven o’clock. We don’t want the teachers that teach the kids staying ten hours a day at school.

“We don’t have the resources we need. Teachers have to buy supplies out of their own pockets for us. We need to stand up for the teachers, and the teachers need to stand up. We need to become one. The kids are the future. Everyone is the future. If we stand together, who can stop us?”

Ashley Ray, another Cass Tech student, also addressed the protest. “I’d just like to come and speak on behalf of one of the students who organized the walkout last Monday. I like to just say thank you all for

supporting us, the students, because that’s what this is all about, not just the teachers. Why we did go out? It wasn’t to spite anyone, or to be vindictive, but it’s to support the teachers.

“Education is the most important thing, and for anyone to try and take that from us is wrong. The teachers have never tried to hurt us. The only things that has hurt us is the lack of books and the large class sizes, the lack of resources—all the things we should have in our schools.”

In a Facebook posting, LaMethia Champion, a parent of a Cass Tech student, said parents throughout the district met over the weekend and proposed to keep their kids home on Count Day. She said, “The action of keeping students home is an initiative by parents from all over the school district. It is solely parent driven.”

Speaking Monday night at a forum organized by the DPS Detroit Parent Network, she Champion said, “We have one of the best schools in the district [Cass Tech] but not because of anything DPS has done. It’s because of the teachers. If not for them we’d be in the same shape as other schools.

“Teachers shouldn’t be spending their money to do their jobs. And administration shouldn’t have to spend their time looking for sponsors.

“The district has already received 90 percent of the funds from the October count day. So this count day on Wednesday is to get that remaining 10 percent. We know how it works, we get 10 days to make up that count, but if we wanted to we could keep them out these 10 days. This is a statement by the parents, that we have the power to withhold funds.”



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