

Parents express support for protesting Detroit teachers and students

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Angry parents denounced the deplorable conditions in the schools and expressed support for ongoing protests by teachers and students during a “town hall meeting” sponsored by a Detroit Public Schools-affiliated organization earlier this week. The meeting on Monday was held as state legislators in Lansing prepare to restructure the school district and divert even more public resources to charter schools and other for-profit education businesses.

The gathering was held at Northwestern High School under the auspices of the Detroit Parents Network (DPN), a body contracted by the school district whose ostensible aim is to encourage “parent engagement.” The Obama administration, which hypocritically claims that educational problems arise from the lack of involvement in particular by poor parents—rather than relentless budget cutting, teacher layoffs, school closures, etc.—has tied a portion of Title 1 federal funding to the level of parent involvement school districts can generate.

Set up with funding from the Skillman, Kellogg and Kresge foundations, as well as JPMorgan Chase and Bank of America, DPN does not give parents any say over the running of the school district. On the contrary, for nearly a decade, the district has been under the dictatorial control of successive state-appointed emergency managers who answers to the bondholders and banks that control school debt.

Monica Johnson, Program Director of the Office of Parent and Community Engagement for DPS was the moderator of the meeting. She repeatedly told the crowd of 70 parents that if they wrote down their complaints and joined various committees they would be able to influence the decision-making process. “We want to partner with the school district and we need you to help us put a process in place. Make sure you join the committee,” admonished Johnson.

When parents took the microphone they voiced their opposition to the miserable learning conditions their children are subjected to. One parent, Kateya, said, “If they destroy our kids, they destroy our future. If [the state agency] Child Protective Services was to come into our homes, and we had

conditions like the ones in our schools, I’d get my babies taken away from me. You want us to send our kids to school when it could be 20 below outside and it’s warmer at home than it is at school because of the lack of heat. How is he supposed to learn in those conditions?”

“The roof is leaking and water is dripping. They finally sent someone in to fix it and they just taped it up. The heat only works sometimes. Because they shut it off over the weekend, on Mondays it’s especially freezing in there.”

Another audience member said, “If we do get new technology, it’s in buildings that are 80 or 90 years old. The EAA [state-run Education Achievement Authority] has the majority of our newer buildings. This School Service Assistance program was promised for at least two schools. Then those schools closed down and students have lost three years of reading assistance.”

Another parent asked, “If we are going to run out of money in April what does this mean for our students?” The panel member curtly replied, “I cannot answer that.” Then another parent said, “If no one can answer that why are we here?”

The meeting erupted in applause when a DPS teacher in the audience said the parent network should endorse the ongoing student walkouts in solidarity with their teachers and in opposition to overcrowded classes, the lack of textbooks and unsanitary conditions in the schools. All of the DPN panel members opposed the proposals, with one saying, “No, that is not what we are doing here.” The parent network, she said, was only there to hear the concerns of parents and pass them on to DPS officials.

After the meeting, several teachers, parents and students spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*. Aliya Moore, parent of two children in DPS said, “Over the past six to ten years of emergency management, the Detroit Public Schools have been slowly demolished.

“This meeting was just a cover-up. The Detroit Parent Network and the group Paxil, which is supposed to be a group for parents, are not informing people of the severity of the situation. If we don’t have the factual information about

our district how are we expected to fight for our rights?”

Aliya said the decisions have already been made behind the backs of parents. “They are giving the parents the illusion that we are going to be at the table. But as long as the EM exists under Public Act 436, we don’t have a voice.”

Aliya said she supported the sickout of teachers 100 percent. “I don’t think they should be criminalized or punished for sticking up for their rights. Our teachers have terrible conditions. They pay for materials out of their own pockets. This is while the emergency managers make six figures. I instill in my children that you have to fight for your rights.”

Dequan ONeal, a graduate of Osborn High School, said he supported the student and teacher protests. “What is happening is 30 years in the making. While I was in school I focused on the violence side and became a youth violence prevention leader. I sought to educate my peers on gang violence and substance abuse.

“I came to realize that the way they were teaching us at Osborn, that it wasn’t really good. We never had efficient technology. We didn’t have art classes. The only thing we were offered in elective classes was gym. So, I think what the students are raising is good.”

Dequan also supported the teachers. “The teachers should be as angry as the students because I know they work so hard and they are disrespected by the administration. Not just in the DPS but in the world. It’s important they took a stand for their rights and the students.”

Dequan described the appalling conditions of poverty facing students in Detroit. “Homelessness is widespread, and it’s especially bad in the area I grew up in on the east side. It’s rough to go to school in this type of environment. A lot of people are squatting in homes. Students don’t come to school because they don’t have hot water at home to take baths. Their clothes are dirty. They are used to living on the streets. And as students they get picked on because they are homeless. Some students go from house to house and they don’t have the opportunity to get back to school because they are on the west side and the school is on the east side.

“I know how it feels to be homeless because I was homeless at one point and for that reason I missed a number of days in school. From that I know how important it is to have a stable place to live so that you don’t have to live day-to-day. The environment is key to being able to learn.”

The WSWs also spoke with teachers outside of Cass Tech High School, which has been a center for student and teacher protests. Regina Kirk, a teacher at Cass Tech, said, “We are for the kids. But these are also our jobs and we still have families and bills to pay.

“When we became teachers we didn’t do it for the money because, as you know, there is not a lot of money in

teaching. But when they start not giving you the things that are necessary to do your job and expect us to just pull a rabbit out of the hat, it’s really disheartening. I think about the Chicago teachers—they want to cut staff and give you more kids to teach. All the studies say lower class sizes help the kids learn. It’s a no-brainer.

“When the emergency manager first came in and took over the district in 2009 nobody remembers that Robert Bobb wanted to put 60 kids in a classroom. Sixty kids!! We are already having a problem with 35-40 in a classroom that only seats 35. And, they are not giving them the necessary supplies.

“A lot of our kids from Detroit are in Title 1 (federal funding program) because they are low-income. But they can’t do homework because they don’t have books to take home.

“I saw a parent on the news last night who said she went on Amazon to buy her son a math book. Because he doesn’t take his book home she couldn’t help him with his homework. These are things we have accepted for a long time. Now it’s time for a change.”

Regina added, “The sickouts weren’t about us not wanting to come to work, but to fight for better conditions for our children. No one else seemed to care. As long as they can ‘balance a budget,’ they don’t care. But they haven’t balanced the budget and they are still pulling money away from the schools.

“We have teachers that are on the starting step-one pay scale for six or seven years. You know, they have families just like everybody else. They are stuck making \$35,000 a year and then they keep making us pay more on our insurance.

“These teachers are the working poor. If you’re making that kind of money, have a family and have to pay more for health care, you are probably eligible for food stamps.”



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