

Who is Judge Steven Rhodes?

The political struggle facing Detroit teachers

Jerry White
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On Wednesday, several hundred Detroit teachers and other school employees attended a meeting at Cass Tech High School with former US bankruptcy judge Steven Rhodes. The retired judge has been picked by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder to be the new emergency manager of the Detroit Public Schools after the departure of Darnell Earley on February 29.

Officials from the Detroit Federation of Teachers met with Rhodes and Snyder on Monday and requested the meeting as part of an ongoing effort to suppress protests by rank-and-file teachers against deteriorating conditions and years of pay and benefit concessions accepted by the DFT. Rhodes who oversaw the 2013-14 Detroit bankruptcy has been brought in to implement a bipartisan school restructuring plan, now being drafted in the state legislature, which will further attack teacher jobs, wages and pensions and funnel more money to for-profit charter schools and educational businesses.

Many teachers at Wednesday's meeting expressed skepticism and anger towards Rhodes who is infamous for violating the state constitution and ruled in favor of city worker pension cuts in during the city's bankruptcy proceedings. A full report of the meeting will be posted on the WSWs tomorrow. Below is the statement that supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and the WSWs Teacher Newsletter distributed to educators and other school employees attending Wednesday's meeting.

Teachers and other Detroit Public School employees are being brought to Cass Tech today for a meeting with former US bankruptcy judge Steven Rhodes, who has been picked to head the DPS "transition team" after the departure of Darnell Earley next week.

According to Detroit Federation of Teachers officials, who met with Rhodes and Michigan Governor Rick Snyder on Monday, the retired judge is looking for input from educators on the future of the public schools.

This is a fraud. The governor did not handpick Rhodes because he is a good listener. On the contrary, Rhodes was chosen because he is a highly political judge who postures as a neutral and even-handed arbiter while doing the dirty work of Wall Street. He personifies the alliance of the two big business parties in their mutual determination to intensify the assault on teachers and all sections of the working class.

Rhodes' essential task is to transfer the methods and results of the Detroit bankruptcy to the current target, public education in Detroit. What was Rhodes' record during the bankruptcy?

On **December 3, 2013** the federal judge ruled that Detroit was eligible for bankruptcy even after acknowledging that the majority of the population believed the proceedings were the result of a years-long conspiracy to "extend the power of the state government" and strip the city of its assets.

In an unprecedented ruling the same day, Rhodes declared pension benefits "are not entitled to any heightened protection in a municipal bankruptcy." With one stroke Rhodes discarded the Michigan Constitution, which explicitly states that such benefits "shall not be diminished or impaired" and gave the green light to destroy the pensions of millions of public employees in Michigan and across the US.

In **April 2014**, Rhodes approved a \$85 million payment to Bank of America and UBS even after acknowledging that the two banks likely broke the law when they inveigled the city into rate swap deals, which were sold to willing Detroit officials as a protection against rising interests rates.

On **September 30, 2014**, Rhodes threw out a motion to stop mass water shutoffs in Detroit and dismissed a lawsuit filed by victims who argued that the shutoff of nearly 400 households a day was doing irreparable harm and threatened to create a public health disaster. Rhodes insisted that there is no "enforceable right to free or affordable water."

In **November 2014**, Rhodes approved a bankruptcy plan that slashed pensions, imposed brutal cuts to retiree health benefits and sold off and privatized public assets like the city's lighting and water system, with the Detroit Institute of Arts handed to a private nonprofit run by corporate interests. The deal funneled even more money to billionaires like Dan Gilbert and Mike Ilitch and the major financial institutions.

The services of Rhodes—who has also been tapped to help loot the assets of the people of Puerto Rico—are now being deployed to see what private investors and educational businesses can extract from the Detroit Public Schools.

Rhodes' particular task is to shepherd through the DPS restructuring plans crafted by Snyder and currently being considered by the state legislature. Earlier this month, DPS Emergency Manager Darnell Earley was forced to announce his

resignation in the midst of outrage over his role as the former emergency manager of Flint who oversaw the poisoning of the city's water supply. The political establishment also confronts growing anger among teachers, expressed in the wave of sickouts that were organized outside of the control of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, and the student walkouts that followed.

Though Earley is leaving, the attack on public education is by no means slowing down. Snyder's plan is to split the district into a "bad DPS" and a "good DPS." Even after the election of a school board in 2017, the new district will be essentially be run by a financial review commission—an emergency manager in another name—that will have dictatorial powers to enforce spending cuts and oversee the expansion of for-profit charter schools.

Making clear that he perfectly understands his role, Rhodes recently said that "the governor's plan, or a plan like it, [has to be] in place as promptly as possible."

Teachers confront not only Rhodes, but a political conspiracy that involves the Democrats no less than the Republicans, with the critical assistance of the Detroit Federation of Teachers itself.

Democrats have hailed the departure of Earley, claiming this is the beginning of a process of returning "local control" over the schools. The demands by Mayor Duggan and the rest of the Detroit political establishment for the restoration of "democracy" and "local control" have nothing do with the interests of teachers, parents and students. Instead the corporate-controlled politicians and union bureaucrats use these honeyed phrases to conceal their own desire for a "piece of the action" from the dismantling of the public education system and the opening up of Detroit's multi-million dollar "education market."

Nationally, the attack on public education has been spearheaded by the Obama administration, which has gone well beyond the reactionary policies of its Republican predecessor in using test-based "accountability" schemes to scapegoat teachers, close so-called failing schools, and undermine public schools in order to make education a new source of profit for the corporations and banks.

As for the unions, they have long functioned as a partner of the Democrats and Republicans in the attacks on teachers and public education. The American Federation of Teachers has colluded with President Obama and Arne Duncan and billionaire enemies of public education like Bill Gates. The AFT and DFT are not opposed to corporate-backed "school reform," they only want a "seat at the table" and a share of the spoils. This includes getting a foot in the door of the fast-growing charter school sector so they can collect union dues from low-paid teachers with little or no rights.

Indeed, the particular talent of Rhodes is his ability to find the right price to pay off the trade unions for their cooperation. The "Grand Bargain" crafted by Rhodes during the bankruptcy

included a half billion payoff to AFSCME in the form of a retiree trust fund and investment vehicle, which they took in exchange for sanctioning the destruction of their members' jobs, wages and social rights.

The only constituency concerned with defending the right to quality education is the broad mass of working people. While the DFT and the Democrats did everything they could to shut down the teacher sickouts and the student walkouts as fast as possible, these actions—taken independently of and in defiance of the DFT/AFT—won widespread support among workers and youth. Every section of the working class is facing relentless attacks even as trillions are handed to the financial aristocracy and wasted on endless and ever-growing wars.

Earlier this month teachers rebelled against the Chicago Teachers Union, which attempted to push through Mayor Rahm Emanuel's attacks on jobs and pensions, and on Monday, more than 200 teachers in the southern California district of Compton, near Los Angeles, carried out sickouts to demand decent wages and conditions. To take these struggles forward, teachers need to build new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by rank-and-file teachers and other school employees, and free from the control of the bought-off unions and big business politicians.

The enemies of public education are strong but the allies of teachers are much stronger. The question is uniting all of the individual struggles of the working class—of Flint residents, autoworkers, teachers—into a single, political movement against and the two corporate-controlled parties and the capitalist system they defend. The aim of such a politically independent movement of the working class must be to break the economic and political stranglehold of the financial aristocracy and advance a socialist program that would use society's vast resources to greatly improve public education and guarantee a future for young people free of poverty, social inequality and war.



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