

“Our money is literally being stolen”

Teacher sickout shuts Detroit Public Schools

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More than 1,500 Detroit teachers called in sick on Monday, forcing the district to cancel classes at 94 of its 97 schools. The action followed the provocative announcement by Detroit Public Schools (DPS) Emergency Manager Steven Rhodes that the district did not have the money to pay teachers over the summer months.

Rhodes had previously assured teachers that the state's \$47.8 million emergency appropriation, enacted in March, would be sufficient to complete payrolls over the summer for those teachers electing to spread their salary throughout the calendar year. Approximately two-thirds of DFT members do so, and face losing thousands of dollars. They have calculated that, without paychecks after June 30, they are already working for free. In addition, Rhodes claimed that there would be no funds available for summer school.

There are over 45,000 students in the DPS, which has shrunk in size drastically while under emergency management since 2009, due to mass school closings and the diversion of public resources to privately-run charter operations. There are some 2,600 teachers in the system.

The eruption of the protest coincides with the resumption by the City of Detroit of the mass disconnection of service for overdue water bills. The shutoffs could affect up to 23,000 households that the city says are behind in their payments.

It also follows the announcement that nearly one-third of tested DPS schools are contaminated with either lead or copper in their drinking water. The results have prompted calls for all DPS students to be tested for lead poisoning, as in nearby Flint.

Monday morning hundreds of angry teachers protested in front of DPS headquarters in midtown Detroit. Some carried signs reading “no pay, no work” and “We fight for Detroit Kids.”

Tracy, a teacher at McKenzie Elementary/Middle School said, “The latest blow is unbelievable. Our money

is literally being stolen. Now they are saying we can't get our money, so effectively as of April 28 we are working for free.”

The Detroit Federation of Teachers sanctioned the latest sickout in an evident attempt to maintain control of a potential rebellion. It follows a series of protests by Detroit teachers in January of this year, which erupted independently of the union, over abysmal conditions in the schools and years of pay and benefits cuts.

With large numbers of teachers opposing any return to work on Tuesday, while the DFT is supposed to be organizing a strike vote, interim DFT president Ivy Bailey sent a message to teachers late Monday afternoon saying, “We are still locked out. We do not work for free and therefore we do not expect you to report to school tomorrow.”

The latest job action follows the appearance of a baiting editorial in the *Detroit News* over the weekend, headlined, “It's time to dump Detroit Public Schools,” that called for essentially scrapping public education and the introduction of a voucher system.

Detroit teachers are in the forefront of the fight to defend public education. It is unprecedented for families in a major US city to be told their schools can be shut down through the actions of the state and their children deprived of education.

The current crisis in Detroit is the product of decades of attacks on public education, overseen by Democrats as well as Republicans, and it is being manipulated to impose an agenda long in preparation. The DPS is being used as a testing ground for the Obama administration's right wing policies, including the virtually unrestricted expansion of for-profit charter schools. In 2009, Obama's former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan declared that Detroit was “ground zero” for so-called school reform in the nation.

Currently Democrats and Republicans in the state legislature are debating a restructuring plan for the Detroit

schools. The DPS is burdened by a crushing debt, largely a product of federal and state funding cutbacks and collapsing enrollment due to the spread of charter schools. All factions agree that major attacks must be imposed on teachers. Competing bills call instead for DPS to be dissolved as an education entity, with the creation of a new school system called the Detroit Community Schools. The DFT is supporting the funding proposal backed by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder and Democrats, as the supposedly “lesser evil.”

However, both plans are meant to facilitate the dismantling of public education and allow private interests free rein over public funds allocated for the schools.

Teachers are by and large hostile to both proposals. A protest called by the DFT in the state capital of Lansing last week to support Snyder’s funding bill drew barely 200 teachers. Teachers contacted by the WSWS expressed anger that union officials at Monday’s protest outside DPS offices tried to silence any chants criticizing Snyder’s restructuring plan. A popular chant was “Old Co., New Co., we say ‘Hell No,’” referring to the proposed creation of a new district in place of DPS.

“When we were chanting that AFT organizers came around and told us to stop,” said one teacher active in organizing the sickouts earlier this year.

A DPS teacher with 16 years’ in the Detroit schools told this reporter, “It is similar to the Enron scam. I don’t have enough fingers to point at all who are to blame. Children are our future. You are supposed to take care of the people who take care of children.”

Steven Rhodes is the latest in a series of state-appointed emergency managers wielding dictatorial authority over DPS. Prior to his current post Rhodes was the federal judge overseeing the Detroit bankruptcy. In that position he carried out a ruling overturning the state’s constitutional protection of public worker pensions, which were then slashed as part of a debt restructuring deal. He has also been hired to do the bidding of the hedge funds which are demanding brutal austerity cuts in Puerto Rico.

In the face of the walkout Rhodes issued a hypocritical statement declaring, “It is unfortunate that the DFT has chosen to make a statement in this way. I am on record saying that I cannot ask anyone in good conscience to work without pay. I am however confident the legislature will support the request that will guarantee that teachers will receive the pay that is owed to them. The DFT’s choice for a drastic call to action was not necessary.”

A factor in the DFT decision to sanction Monday’s

sickout is likely the upcoming June 30 contract expiration. Under provisions of Michigan’s new Right-to-Work law, after that date teachers can no longer be compelled to pay dues to the DFT as a condition of employment. DFT officials rightly fear a mass exodus from the union if teachers are no longer compelled to pay dues to support the union apparatus.

Concern over this, and more importantly the potential that a rebellion by teachers could provoke a far broader mobilization of the working class against the Obama administration, has led AFT President Randi Weingarten to basically take up temporary residence in Detroit. Weingarten, whose salary is \$543,000, has collaborated with such enemies of public education as billionaire Bill Gates, and is a fervent supporter of Hillary Clinton, who championed the right-wing campaign for “school choice,” i.e., opening public education to the private market.

The teachers’ action on Monday won the support of many students. Alex, a student at Cass Tech High School in Detroit, told the WSWS, “We think this is good. We aren’t getting a fair education. We have leaks in the roof. We need books and supplies. We see the conditions in our schools, then we see that teachers aren’t even getting paid. We need to find out where the money is going.”

During the rally outside of the school headquarters, Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Jerry White and vice presidential candidate Niles Niemuth addressed sections of the protest with a bullhorn. They explained that the DFT and AFT were conspiring with Governor Snyder and Rhodes to destroy public education. The socialist candidates denounced the claims that there was no money for teacher salaries, public education or water, when trillions were spent on bank bailouts and war.

Urging teachers to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the DFT through the building of rank-and-file committees, they called for a unified struggle by all sections of the working class—Detroit city workers, autoworkers, families facing water shutoffs, parents and students—against the capitalist system and both big business parties.



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