

In midst of water shutoffs, Flint water crisis

Detroit teachers shut schools for second day to protest non-payment of wages

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On Tuesday, more than 1,500 Detroit Public Schools (DPS) teachers continued a sickout begun the previous day, closing 94 out of 97 schools across the city. The teachers are protesting a threat announced over the weekend by state-appointed DPS Emergency Manager Judge Steven Rhodes to withhold their pay during the summer months and eliminate summer classes.

For the three-fourths of Detroit teachers who receive a portion of their wages during the summer, the suspension of payments would equal the loss of five paychecks covering nearly 40 working days.

The new attack on Detroit teachers is part of a broader assault on the working class in southeast Michigan and across the state being carried out by both big business parties, backed by the Obama administration. On Monday, the Democratic Detroit administration began cutting off water to 23,000 households in the impoverished city that have fallen behind on their payments, while 70 miles to the north in Flint, another urban area devastated by auto plant closures and budget cuts, 100,000 residents continue to suffer from the lead poisoning of their water supply by Republican state and Democratic local officials.

The attack on Flint workers, like the assault on Detroit teachers, is being carried out under the auspices of an unelected emergency manager appointed by Republican Governor Rick Snyder.

The Obama administration is directly complicit in these attacks. The White House and its education secretary have aggressively promoted the spread of for-profit charter schools in the name of education “reform.” Former Education Secretary Arne Duncan, appointed by Obama, referred to Detroit as “ground zero” in the drive to privatize public schools.

Obama supported the 2013 bankruptcy of Detroit, presided over by Judge Rhodes, which was used to violate the state constitution and impose massive cuts in the pensions and health benefits of city workers and privatize public assets, including the Detroit Institute of Arts.

In Flint, the Obama administration’s Environmental Protection Agency concealed for months that the decision to switch the city’s water supply to the polluted Flint River had

resulted in disastrously high levels of lead in the water used by residents for drinking, cooking and bathing.

President Obama is slated to make a stage-managed public relations appearance in Flint on Wednesday to feign support for Flint residents. In fact, his administration has allocated a totally inadequate and paltry sum to deal with a health crisis that will affect thousands of youth and workers for decades. It has announced that it will end all federal aid to Flint in August.

The teachers’ action, broadly supported by Detroit parents and students, is part of a continuing and growing movement of militant resistance against attacks on jobs, wages and social necessities such as education and health care stretching back to the wage concessions and layoffs imposed on autoworkers as part of the 1979 bailout of Chrysler carried out by the Carter administration, with the collaboration of the United Auto Workers union.

Thousands of workers and youth in Flint have demonstrated against the poisoning of their water supply, demanding the replacement of the city’s rotting lead water pipes with a modern and safe system, as well as full and free medical care for all those affected by the lead poisoning. Last year, autoworkers rebelled against sellout contracts with the Detroit-based auto makers signed by the United Auto Workers union.

Nationally, the growth of working class opposition is reflected in the ongoing strike by 39,000 Verizon workers against the telecom giant.

The unions, including the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and its Detroit branch, the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), have done all they can to block a struggle by teachers and the rest of the working class. Earlier this year, teachers themselves organized a series of sickouts independently of the union to oppose filthy and unsafe conditions in the schools.

The union officially called the sickouts on Monday and Tuesday in an attempt to get ahead of and contain further anticipated wildcat actions. Now it is seeking to call off the struggle on the basis of worthless assurances from Judge Rhodes.

Hundreds of teachers demonstrated Tuesday morning, the

second day of protests in front of DPS headquarters. On Tuesday afternoon, some 700 teachers attended a meeting called by the DFT and addressed by AFT President Randi Weingarten. The teachers were told they would be taking a strike vote, but instead Weingarten read a statement from Judge Rhodes declaring that DPS was contractually bound to make good on wages due the teachers.

Weingarten, who is working with Rhodes, Democratic state legislators and Republican Governor Snyder to pass an emergency funding bill that includes a restructuring of the Detroit school system, declared Rhodes' statement a "victory" and told the teachers to end their action and return to work on Wednesday.

Teachers at the meeting were visibly angry and skeptical toward Weingarten and the DFT and their claims that Rhodes' assurances were good coin. There were shouts of "strike" in the meeting hall and several teachers had their microphones taken away by union functionaries when they criticized the union and the restructuring deal it is supporting. One dissident teacher was forcibly removed from the meeting.

Niles Niemuth, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for vice president in the US national election, issued a statement to the teachers calling for a mass united struggle of teachers and all sections of workers and youth across the state and nationally.

The union-backed restructuring plan, which would provide some \$715 million in funds to help cover the DPS deficit, includes the establishment of a financial council with a mandate to oversee DPS for a period of five years. This scheme would provide a framework for new and more sweeping attacks on the jobs, tenure, wages and working conditions of teachers.

The teachers union is supporting this plan, which has been passed by the Republican-controlled Michigan Senate, over a rival plan backed by Republican House members that would strip the DFT of its legal status as bargaining agent for the teachers. With the current DPS contract expiring on June 30, after which the recently passed Michigan "right to work" law takes effect, allowing teachers to refuse to pay dues to the union, the sole concern of the AFT and DFT is to preserve their institutional interests and income flow from dues. In return for this, they are prepared to offer up new "sacrifices" to be imposed on the rank and file.

As the teachers were protesting Tuesday, thousands of Detroiters were scrambling to scrape together funds in a last-ditch effort to avoid the shutoff of their water. Across the city, contractors hired by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) are gearing up to shut off the flow of water to households considered delinquent by the department.

In contrast to Obama's assertions, made in a recent interview, that his economic policies have broadly benefited the American people and his complaints of being "unappreciated," statistics published last week by the Brookings Institution show that the American population has experienced a massive growth in

"concentrated poverty" during the Obama years, with the highest rates occurring precisely in southeastern Michigan.

In fighting back, workers need to grasp the fundamental political and class nature of the attack they are facing. Detroit and Flint are particularly sharp expressions of an all-out assault on the working class in cities and localities across the country. Schools, health care, pensions, jobs, wages and housing are all being targeted by a corporate-financial oligarchy that controls both parties and the government as a whole, and will stop at nothing to make working people pay for endless wars abroad and more windfalls for the rich and super-rich.

These attacks cannot be successfully fought on a sectional, piecemeal basis. Every section of workers and youth must be brought together in a united struggle for socialist policies and a workers' government.

In Detroit and Michigan, teachers should turn out to students and the unemployed, victims of water and utility shutoffs, Flint residents, autoworkers and city workers to mount a united social and political offensive. The claims that "there is no money" should be rejected with the contempt they deserve. There is ample money, but it is being monopolized by a new aristocracy and squandered to pay for regional wars and the buildup to a new world war.

It is time for workers to stop listening to what the capitalist class says it can afford to give. Workers need to draw up their own list of non-negotiable demands, including the basic social rights to secure employment at a decent wage, quality public schools and decent housing, free health care, a secure retirement and access to culture and the arts.

This requires the repudiation of the debts to the banks and hedge funds and the transformation of all utilities and major corporations and banks into publicly owned and democratically controlled entities—that is, the fight for a socialist program.



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