

Detroit Public School teachers end sickouts, face new legislative attacks

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With American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten taking the lead, the Detroit teachers union instructed its membership at a mass meeting Tuesday afternoon to end their two-day sickout and return work. The powerful work action in protest against a threat to withhold paychecks over the summer months had effectively shut the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) system.

The teachers reluctantly acquiesced to the union's demand, but there was widespread skepticism over assurances from DPS Emergency Manager Steven Rhodes that their paychecks would be forthcoming, and deep concern about the implications for their jobs, wages, benefits and working conditions of a union-backed scheme under debate in the state legislature to reorganize the school district.

At the meeting, union officials claimed victory, producing a letter from Rhodes reversing his previous statement that he could not guarantee payments to teachers after June 30. The former federal judge presided over the 2013-2014 bankruptcy of Detroit, overseeing the slashing of city workers' pensions and health benefits and the privatization of city assets.

Speaking to the teachers at Tuesday's membership meeting, amid calls from the floor for strike action and denunciations of the union's inaction, Weingarten praised Rhodes, calling him "transparent." She told the teachers, "He has been candid in the process. He is very frustrated. I think he is trying to do what he can."

"They're just placating us," preschool teacher Julie Hamburg told the *Detroit News* after the meeting. "Our demands have been completely dismissed." On social media, one teacher asked, "Why did we have to go through this BS?" Another teacher replied, "We were used." A third wrote, "Completely! They had their agenda and we were part of it!"

The AFT and the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) are supporting a DPS debt-repayment plan pushed by Rhodes, Republican Governor Rick Snyder, Republicans in the state Senate and Democratic state legislators. The plan has thus far been blocked by Republicans in the state House, who want to impose even more draconian provisions against teachers. These include a requirement that teachers reapply for their jobs in a newly organized school district, the decertification of teachers who take part in work actions, the abrogation of the contract with the DFT, and limitations on the union's ability to bargain with school authorities.

Both "rescue" plans include the establishment of a financial review panel with dictatorial powers over the district's finances.

Since teachers earlier this year carried out a series of sickouts independently of the union to protest filthy and unsafe conditions in the schools, the AFT and the Detroit local have done everything in their power to line up school employees behind Snyder's plan in the hopes of maintaining their franchise and dues income under the new setup. By putting a stop to teacher sickouts, the union is seeking to demonstrate to the ruling class its utility in policing the working class.

The Snyder-Rhodes plan, supported by the AFT, is designed first and foremost to guarantee the investments of state bondholders. Moody's has repeatedly downgraded the district's debt, while Standard & Poor's put \$469 million of district notes from 2011, 2012 and 2015 on credit watch as of March.

Wall Street is making it clear that the DPS debt amassed under a series of state-appointed emergency managers must be repaid through the gutting of public education.

On Tuesday, the Michigan House Appropriations

Committee passed a plan that removes \$200 million in transition funding provided by the Senate bill, all but guaranteeing the new school district will be bankrupt from the start.

The House bill also allows non-certified teachers and waives requirements for student teaching for some educators, laying the basis for replacing current teachers with lower-paid new hires. The bill delays local school board governance until 2018, replacing it with a seven-member board whose majority is appointed by the governor. It also seeks to escalate privatization by eliminating a proposed Detroit Education Commission that could slow down the replacement of public schools with charters.

Finally, the House attached an appropriation measure to the bill, so that, under Michigan law, it cannot be repealed by voters. This hugely undemocratic subterfuge was employed to enact the emergency manager law PA 436 after the previous emergency manager law had been overwhelmingly defeated in a statewide referendum.



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