Michigan state House passes draconian attack on public education

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After a two-day sickout earlier this week Detroit teachers returned to work, only to be greeted with a long denunciation of their protest by emergency manager Steven Rhodes, and the passage of a draconian Detroit Public Schools reorganization package by the state House of Representatives.

Wheeling and dealing until 4 AM Thursday, right-wing state representatives passed an unprecedented series of attacks on public education and teachers in the form of a DPS "rescue" which, in fact, sets the stage for the privatization of the district and the impoverishment of teachers.

The measures require all staff to reapply for their jobs, allow the hiring of noncertified teachers [previously illegal in the state of Michigan] and tie teacher pay to test scores. They would also impose punitive measures—includingstrippingstatecertification—onschool workers who strike. This measure will now go the state Senate, which has passed a competing, slightly less punitive, version.

The same day, in an email to Detroit teachers, Rhodes launched into a lengthy diatribe, denouncing the two-day sick-out by the teachers as "unnecessary and unfortunate." He charged that it "puzzled, angered and alienated state legislators…threatened the community's ability to achieve our shared goal" and "deprived children, children! of a nutritious breakfast and lunch." He went on to warn that the sickout could cost $4 million in state funding for Detroit schools and lead to future job reductions.

Detroit teachers, largely reluctantly, returned to the classroom Wednesday after being instructed to do so by the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten. Two days of sickouts had effectively closed the school district in order to counter the threat by Rhodes that all salaries would end June 30 when, he said, the district would "run out of money." This meant that teachers who asked the district to put aside a portion of their salaries during the school year so they could be paid throughout the summer months would lose their own money.

Rhodes dashed off a letter to the DFT asserting that teachers would be paid so Weingarten could read it at a Tuesday evening union meeting.

The unions have thrown their full backing to the Senate bill that has the support of Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder and Rhodes. Both versions are reactionary measures that would liquidate the DPS as an education entity and create a new school system. Both plans place control of finances in the hands of an unelected financial review commission.

However, according to the DFT and AFT, the House version would essentially nullify collective bargaining in the newly established school district. The differing proposals reflect tactical differences within the political establishment, with the Snyder-Senate plan looking to maintain the unions in order to suppress opposition to their restructuring plans, while the House version seeks to eliminate the unions altogether.

The DFT and AFT bureaucracies are not opposed to further attacks on teachers and public education. Instead they are collaborating with the Republican governor to impose his plan in order to maintain the legal backing of the state government and guarantee the continued flow of dues income into their bank accounts.

DFT president Ivy Bailey, in her email to teachers, attempted to justify the union's betrayal of the teacher protests, saying the state legislators had used the sickouts as their excuse for the new legislation. "Engaging in more sickouts would play into the hands of politicians set on killing our schools and our union," she wrote. Demonstrating the union's corrupt partnership with both Republicans and Democrats, she told teachers, "Now is

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the time to demand Gov. Rick Snyder veto these bills if they come to his desk…. Now is the time to contact our legislators … to do the right thing for Detroit's kids and schools." Bailey also added, "Rest assured that we have a team of lobbyists," etc.

For his part, Rhodes added a not-so-veiled warning directed to the union saying the sickout "diminished, on the threshold of collective bargaining, our productive and mutually beneficial relationship with the DFT." At the same time Rhodes acknowledged "the internal challenges that DFT leadership faces." That is the mass opposition by teachers to the rotten and corrupt attempt by the union to impose round after round of sacrifices on teachers, students and parents.

Teachers responded angrily both to the threats by Rhodes and the craven capitulation by the DFT. One Detroit teacher posted on Facebook in response to Bailey's statement, "I read it. Writing to my legislators, in my opinion, would be a great waste of time. They have shown exactly who and what they are. Power is never willingly relinquished." Another said, "I just read it and I am sick all over again." A third commented, "I want my dues refunded now!"

Nowanna, a pre-Kindergarten noon hour aide, told the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter*, "All the teachers at my school are highly upset. They think that Ivy Bailey is not really for us. They felt that they shouldn't have gone back to work yesterday. They were irate, but bit the bullet and returned.

"After being out three days, you need a doctor's excuse and Rhodes wrote a letter saying teachers would get their pay. But they knew it was wrong to go back. "We figure they are going to privatize the schools. I just wonder who the 'they' is ... somebody has a plan. They've been working on this plan to privatize for a while now.

"They are now offering a group of us to become school service assistants and then, in the fall, to be signed in as associate teachers. There is a shortage of associates because they can't get them. They are not getting paid very much, next to nothing in fact. That's why they're now training us lower classification workers. It's actually not fair to the kids because we have much less experience.

"New teachers are also being paid much less. It's really bad, they're stripping benefits. It no longer pays to be a DPS teacher. Young people go into debt, get a masters' degree, then they're asked to make less and less."

Patricia, a recently retired Detroit teacher, said she opposed Rhodes' threats. "What Rhodes is doing is wrong. I think it is a scare tactic. What the teachers did undermines him. They had threatened them in the past about striking, and they did it anyway.

"They are still pushing for charters and privatizing. Everyone has the right to voice their concerns, as a whole or as an individual. I don't think what the teachers did was illegal.

"I think this has been planned for decades. They have laid off teachers, reassigned teachers and made cuts. They want to get rid of seniority rights and lay off who they want. Yet the deficit gets bigger and then they want to blame teachers.

"But where did the money go? It is like Flint, no one wants to take the blame."

Another teacher, David, said, "Letters and appeals to legislators is not making a bit of difference. I wrote a long letter and sent it to all my representatives." Referring to the House bill, which would allow non-certified teachers in a new Detroit Community School District, he said, "I explained to the legislators they what they are doing to the DPS is unconstitutional.

"Now the union is telling us to go to Ann Arbor and write with chalk on the pavement by Snyder's home. This is completely useless. The House bill is completely demeaning to workers. We would have to reapply for our jobs. I'm a Step 10, would they start me at Step 2? Experience means nothing any more. There is no loyalty to employees anywhere.

"It's a shame what they are doing. They are underfunding education everywhere. My daughter's district counts every penny and made every change they could think of and they're still in crisis. When Snyder came in, eight school districts were in financial crisis, now it is 112."

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