

Detroit Federation of Teachers backs right-wing attack on public education

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9 May 2016

Detroit teachers have been waging a determined struggle to defend public education, including a series of sickouts since January. These job actions culminated in last week's two-day closure of 94 Detroit Public Schools (DPS), following threats by DPS emergency manager Judge Steven Rhodes that the district would run out of funds by June 30 and halt scheduled summer checks.

Throughout this struggle, the Detroit Federation of Teachers has played a treacherous role. It has sought at every turn to channel teachers behind pleas to local Democratic Party officials, the state legislature and now Judge Stephen Rhodes and Republican Governor of Michigan, Rick Snyder.

All of the state politicians have agreed that the nearly 175-year old school district must be ended and a new district set up that is more closely aligned with the demands of state bondholders and Wall Street.

For their part, the pro-capitalist unions never challenged the basic contention that the DPS debt to hedge funds and other holders of Michigan bonds should be paid at the expense of teachers and children. They have therefore framed the dispute as a choice between competing reorganization plans offered by the state Senate and House.

A fraud has been perpetrated on teachers, whose struggle has been deliberately isolated and sabotaged. American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten has spared no effort in assisting local officials in shutting down the sickouts and neutering the demands of teachers, flying into town repeatedly to show up for various reactionary stunts.

Last week DFT interim president Ivy Bailey, who has thrown the full support of the union behind the Senate version of the reorganization supported by Snyder and Rhodes, sent out a letter to teachers instructing, "Now is not the time for more sickouts." Instead, she declared, "Now is the time to demand Gov. Rick Snyder veto these bills [the House version] if they come to his desk."

"The most strategic way to fight back is to influence lawmakers in the Senate to do the right thing," the letter continued. "Rest assured that we have a team of lobbyists, educators, parents, community allies and influencers who have been in Lansing fighting for Detroit's schools... This is our moment to convince the Senate and the governor that the House

bills are wrong."

Endorsing the DFT sabotage of the teachers' struggle, United Auto Workers President Dennis Williams issued a similar statement: "We call upon the governor to veto this overreach of authority."

Of course, Bailey, Williams, Weingarten, et al. are fully aware that Snyder—with the bipartisan support of the Michigan legislature—has carried through the largest broadside against education and public workers in the state's history. Snyder is justly infamous for his cuts to public education, hundreds of millions of dollars in tax handouts to businesses and for using emergency manager laws to rip up pensions and jobs and privatize city services. His name will forever be linked with the criminal poisoning of Flint's water and its associated deaths and human costs.

Likewise with Judge Steven Rhodes, named by Snyder as the emergency manager of the Detroit Public Schools for the purpose of carrying through the dissolution of the public school district and the direct subordination of education to the banks via a Financial Review Commission. This was precisely Rhodes' role in the Detroit municipal bankruptcy.

Denouncing teachers and their rights, Rhodes reacted to last week's two-day sickout—which he provoked by threatening not to pay them—by terming it an "illegal strike" and penning a long letter blackguarding teachers for "depriving children" of an education and nutritious food.

The teachers unions, like their counterparts in other industries, are not working class organizations, but co-conspirators in the attack on workers.

The DFT and AFT are backing the Senate package, Bills 710, 711 and 819-822, because they allow for the continued use of the unions in the plans of the ruling class. Any contract negotiated between Rhodes and the DFT prior to the spin-off of the new district would be rolled over to the Detroit Community School District. In the language of the bill, "The terms and conditions of a collective bargaining agreement applicable to employees of the qualifying district on the transfer date would be the terms and conditions applicable to employees of the community district."

In return for a "seat at the table" for the union hierarchy and the accompanying dues money, the DFT is giving their blessing

to the creation of a new model of education management that will set a new precedent in the destruction of public education.

Because the struggles of teachers took place over the heads of the union officialdom and threatened to escape their control, the DFT/AFT has been joined in this betrayal by the UAW, which is equally frightened of the growing opposition of workers to the attack on their living standards and rights.

The unions have justified their self-serving deal by pointing to the draconian measures passed by the Michigan state House. The House bills are indeed an unprecedented assault on education, but they simply escalate the overall time-frame for the privatization of Detroit schools that both plans incorporate. There is far more in common with both legislative initiatives than what divides them.

The debt faced by Detroit schools is being used as a pretext for the destruction of a major city's public education, to be replaced with a proliferation of charter schools and an increasingly apparent class-based education system.

The DFT has not only called off the sickouts in their effort to support this legislation, but organized demonstrations in Lansing, mobilized neighborhood canvasses, phone banks and devoted countless thousands of dollars in resources all for the purpose of lining up teachers behind these reactionary measures.

What do the Senate reorganization bills contain?

* The most important provision is that the new educational entity, the Detroit Community School District, will be placed under the thumb of the Financial Review Commission (FRC), a group of businessmen and politicians who presently oversee the city of Detroit. Despite the bills' provision for some nominal control going to a "locally elected school board," all substantial decision making will reside with the FRC.

The FRC appoints the Chief Financial Officer of the new district and he/she serves at the Commission's pleasure. The FRC oversees "the streamlining of the provision of services and review of the compensation and benefits of employees." In other words, it will mandate, via dictat, cuts to programs, services and personnel. All substantial contracts (including with any unions) must be approved by the FRC.

The FRC is there to exert the control of the financial industry directly and to slash the costs of education. It is mandated to report quarterly as to the status of all debt service due on bonds, leases and other debt. It is authorized to inspect or audit all district "financial statements, actuarial reports, revenue estimates, and all other documents, data, or findings that the Commission considers necessary to carry out its purpose."

* The bills' sponsor Geoff Hansen (R-Hart) emphasized, "The plan maintains education choice and improves choice options for parents and students." He explained that it would identify "priority zones" that lacked charter schools and would assist in their creation.

* The bills provide vast new powers to the State School Reform/Redesign Office (SRRO), a state oversight body for

"low performing schools." Last year Governor Snyder moved this department out of the jurisdiction of the state's Education Department to his direct control under the Department of Technology, Management and Budget. Under the SRRO, Snyder appointed a Chief Executive Officer—an emergency manager with a new name—to run East Detroit Schools last February.

This dubious office will now institute a "community district accountability system" annually to assign a letter grade of A, B, C, D, E or F to each public school based on a point scale, and "require points to be assigned based on a school's performance on proficiency, growth, and nonacademic measures".

The model is the well-known formula—incorporated in the anti-public education agenda of the Obama administration—for punishing impoverished schools by first putting them under "state intervention" and then closing them down and replacing them with for-profit run charters.

* The Educational Achievement Authority (EAA) schools are to be returned to the Detroit Community School District, but those schools will continue to pay school employees, including teachers, the lower EAA pay and benefits for two additional years.

Senate Bills 713-715, authored by Phil Pavlov (R-St. Clair Township) introduce new provisions for fines and decertification of teachers deemed violating the state anti-strike law. They are still pending in the state legislature.

The defense of the right to a high quality education requires uniting teachers, schoolworkers, autoworkers and the entire working class in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions and the political representatives of both political parties, who are entirely subordinate to the financial elite. The debts of Detroit Public Schools should be repudiated, and additional new funding for education paid for through the nationalization of the banks and auto industry as part of a socialist program implemented by the working class.



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