

After sickouts, what is the way forward for Detroit teachers?

Jerry White—SEP candidate for US president
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Since the beginning of the year, southeast Michigan has been a center of working class opposition to government and corporate attacks on living standards and basic rights, with sickouts by Detroit teachers and demonstrations by Flint residents against the lead poisoning of their water supply. Despite the efforts to silence and intimidate workers—including Obama’s cynical “everything will be fine” visit to Flint—the resistance continues. Last week, thousands of Detroit teachers shut down the school district in a two-day sickout against threats to withhold pay owed to them.

The struggles of Detroit teachers and Flint workers are part of a rising tide of working class militancy and political radicalization nationwide. They follow the rebellion last fall by autoworkers against the sellout contracts signed by the United Auto Workers, and they coincide with the strike by 39,000 Verizon workers in New York and other eastern states.

The resurgence of the class struggle in the US is part of an international process. Recent months have seen mass strikes and protests in France and Greece against austerity and attacks on democratic rights and a wave of strikes in China and India in response to deepening global economic crisis.

As the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for president of the United States, I applaud the stand taken by Detroit teachers and workers and youth in Flint. The first step in halting the assault on the working class is the decision to take matters in our own hands and fight back. At the same time, I urge workers in Detroit and Flint to broaden their struggles by turning out to ever wider sections of the working class. A united movement must be forged against the attempt of big business and its political servants in both parties to make working people pay for the failure of the capitalist profit system.

To be successful, these struggles cannot be conducted as disparate and sectional battles. Even as Detroit teachers are being made the scapegoats for the ruling class policy of starving and dismantling the public schools and Flint residents are being poisoned as part of the corporate drive to privatize the water system, tens of thousands of impoverished households are having their water and utilities shut off for failure to pay exorbitant rates.

This is a class struggle, and we must wage it as a class struggle. It is also a political struggle against not just one

company or one politician or party, but against the capitalist system as a whole.

It is important to review the recent experiences and draw the necessary lessons. After decades in which the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) colluded with the Democrats and Republicans to close schools, lay off teachers and destroy school workers’ wages and benefits, rank-and-file teachers took the initiative and began organizing a series of sickout protests in defiance of the DFT. When militant teachers were threatened with injunctions and arrest, high school students walked out in their defense.

The sickouts were a step forward, but they immediately posed more sharply the fundamental political questions confronting teachers and the working class as a whole. The experience of the past several months has exposed the various political forces aligned against the teachers.

A fight against the government

While Detroit Mayor Duggan, the Detroit Caucus in the state legislature and other local authorities have feigned support for teachers, in fact the political establishment in Detroit, long run by the Democratic Party, has spent decades cutting budgets, laying off teachers and closing schools. In the name of restoring “local control,” they are seeking to regain oversight of the school budget and profit from the lucrative business opportunities available through the further privatization of the schools and the gutting of teachers’ wages and pensions.

The Democrats are collaborating with Republican Governor Rick Snyder and the Republican-controlled state government to restructure the Detroit Public Schools (DPS). They are crafting a deal to close more schools, attack teachers and funnel additional money to charter schools and other for-profit operations. The deal will likely include severe punishments, including the decertification of teachers, for further sickouts and struggles.

Governor Rick Snyder picked former federal judge Steven Rhodes as the DPS emergency manager because of his role

during the 2013-14 Detroit bankruptcy, when he slashed public employee pensions in violation of the state constitution and sold off the public water system and placed the Detroit Institute of Arts under the control of a corporate-run body. While insisting that Wall Street and the big bondholders were paid, Rhodes ruled that citizens had no right to free or affordable water, much less food, shelter and medical care.

The fight by teachers also thrusts them into a political conflict with the Obama administration, which declared in 2009 that Detroit was “ground zero” for its policies of test-based “accountability” schemes, destroying tenure and expanding for-profit education. While bailing out Wall Street, Obama did not bail out Detroit and other cities and school districts, which were forced into ever-greater indebtedness to the same financial criminals responsible for the 2008 crash. Instead, he backed the Detroit bankruptcy and has supported the efforts of both Democrats and Republicans alike to exploit the financial crisis to destroy teacher jobs and open up the “education market” to billionaires and other hucksters.

A fight against the teachers unions

Far from defending teachers, the DFT, the American Federation of Teachers, the United Auto Workers and other unions are backing the Snyder-Rhodes plan to destroy public education. They support the plan because it would preserve the DFT as the bargaining agent in a “new” school district. The DFT will give up every right of teachers—their wages, pensions, tenure and job security, along with the educational conditions of students—as long as the union maintains a “seat at the table.”

The DFT and the other unions are politically-aligned with the Democratic Party and are now promoting the Republican Snyder as a friend of working people. Their role is to try to subordinate teachers and all workers to the state and the corporate interests that it represents.

After decades in which the DFT told teachers that they have no choice but to accept layoffs, school closings and wage and benefit cuts, teachers said enough is enough and took action independently of the unions. Instead of wasting time making fruitless appeals to their class enemies, teachers should formulate their own demands and fight to mobilize the widest support in the working class to win them.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for:

- The repudiation of all debts. Teachers and other workers should not be forced to pay for the crisis caused by the financial and political elite.
- A massive infusion of funds into the public school system, the city’s infrastructure and housing. Billions of dollars must be spent on a public works program to upgrade the school system and infrastructure throughout Detroit and Flint.

- Utilities, including heat, gas, electricity and clean water are social rights that must be guaranteed to all. We call for an immediate end to all water and utility shutoffs.

- The expropriation of the vast financial resources of General Motors, Ford, Fiat Chrysler and the other large corporations, which must be placed under public control for democratic allocation decided by the people.

These demands and others should be the subject of a unified and broad-based discussion by workers throughout the city and state in order to formulate a plan of action for a general strike and mass demonstrations.

Workers must revive the great traditions of the class struggle in southeast Michigan—where the sit-down strikes and mass industrial battles of the 1930s paralyzed the world’s largest corporations. This means rejecting the efforts of the Democrats, the unions and various pseudo-left outfits who seek to inject racial politics by claiming that the attack on Detroit schools and the poisoning of Flint is “racist.” The aim of this ploy is to divide the working class and conceal the class character of these attacks.

Teachers face powerful enemies, but they have even more powerful allies: autoworkers, public sector and service workers, students, youth and the unemployed, of every race and nationality. The Socialist Equality Party is leading the fight for the building of a mass socialist movement of the working class, to unite every struggle into a single political struggle whose aim is the establishment of a workers’ government and the reorganization of economic life to meet human needs, not profit.

We call on teachers and all workers to support the SEP election campaign and build a political leadership to fight back.



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