

Teachers' union sanctions destruction of Detroit Public Schools district

Nancy Hanover
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After 174 years as a storied institution of public learning, on June 30 the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) district will be transformed into an entity solely dedicated to tax collection and debt servicing. The Michigan state legislature passed a compromise bill for this purpose on June 8. It now awaits Governor Rick Snyder's signature.

A new replacement school system will be established that will be more closely tailored to the financial interests of Wall Street and for-profit education businesses. The deal will protect investors holding Michigan state general obligation bonds while a new sub-standard school district will be created on July 1.

Snyder and his appointed emergency manager, former US bankruptcy Judge Steven Rhodes, pushed through the legislation in order to avoid a DPS bankruptcy and possible losses to the financial industry.

The DPS debt, like that facing schools across the US, arises primarily as a result of state and federal defunding of education, an aging education infrastructure and a lack of resources for upgrades outside of the bond market. State tax policies provide massive boondoggles to big business at the expense of education and other social programs. In other words, the creation of school district debt is not an aberration, it is political policy implemented by both Democrats and Republicans.

This politically manipulated crisis and the threat of bankruptcy are being used to effect a frontal assault on education, creating in Detroit a new type of "public school," which is entirely class-based and open to privatization. It is entirely in line with the Obama administration's pro-charter policies. Last month, recently appointed US Secretary of Education John B. King Jr. indicated the administration's support for the process in Detroit, urging the legislature to stop dragging its feet on the reorganization.

Giving its blessing to this frontal assault on teachers and public education is the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT). In an e-mail to members last week, interim DFT President Ivy Bailey provided a crude rationalization for what amounts to the criminal destruction of education in the former Motor City. While the pending bills "fall short," Bailey claims, they represented an "improvement over what the House had originally passed."

"These bills provide inadequate funding," the interim president wrote, "and require that new hires' pay be based primarily on evaluations. In addition, the legislation allows for non-certified people to teach--only in Detroit schools--without any requirements for education, experience or preparation and makes it easier to punish educators across the state for 'striking,' with increased penalties."

These devastating attacks on teachers are merely "falling short" and an "improvement," the DFT declares. Bailey goes on to thank the membership for "calling legislators, writing letters, and phone banking," emphasizing that the deal will pay the debt and continue union "representation." With these words, the DFT signals its support to a massive assault on teachers including: the deliberate underfunding of the new district, a form of merit pay, the creation of unprecedented lower teaching standards as well as vindictive penalties for teachers' protests.

If any further proof was needed, this makes clear that the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their local DFT affiliate are not workers' organizations, but organizations controlled by self-serving bureaucrats completely hostile to the interests of both educators and children.

The new law mandates punitive fines for school workers should they be found in violation of the state's anti-strike law. The well-heeled hierarchy in the DFT welcomes these measures as an additional stick with which to intimidate the membership and prevent rebellion.

The new district will be allowed, for the first time ever in the state of Michigan, to hire noncertified and non-endorsed individuals with no degree or training in education as "teachers." Additionally, after three years, these individuals will be made eligible for a provisional teaching certificate without a student-teaching requirement.

The new law will expand the powers of the state to close schools. It requires an "A" through "F" grading system, a standard ploy promoted by the privatization industry to market the closing of schools as "pro-student." The new measures grant the governor-appointed school reform/redesign officer the power to close schools that fall into the "lowest achieving 5% for three years." To further facilitate the charterization of schools, the new legislation explicitly states that schools can

outsource their operations and authorize their own charter schools.

Several days after the agreement, Michigan AFT President and Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren Co-Chair David Hecker penned a column in the rabidly pro-charter *Detroit News* mouthing a weak complaint. “We are now left with a package of bills that abandons anything that looks like a plan for stable education opportunities in Detroit.”

Hecker’s attempt to dissociate himself from the deal will hardly wash with teachers. Hecker has been at the center of the conspiracy behind the legislation, working for an entire year alongside Democrats, Republicans, big business foundations, corporate and charter interests to promote the restructuring plan. Now he feigns shock, announcing that “the Republicans are willing to jeopardize our children’s future to make money,” and noting the deal will mean “forced school closures for public schools but not charter schools”.

For her part, Bailey tells teachers that the state legislators took their interests into account, “However, because of your work outside the classroom, this legislation is an improvement over the original House plan that provided a lower investment in DPS, had DPS employees reapplying for their jobs and eliminated union representation.”

This cuts to the chase. The DFT is on board with the destruction of the DPS as long as they have “a seat at the table” and can collect dues money. Just this week, the DFT received a short reminder from Bailey, “Before you head out for summer break, make sure you are still a member of the Detroit Federation of Teachers by signing up for alternative dues payment.”

The last year’s struggles have laid bare both the grave nature of the attacks on public education in Detroit and nationally, and the reactionary nature of the pro-capitalist unions. The AFT, national President Randi Weingarten, Michigan President David Hecker and local DFT officials are responsible for enabling this precedent-setting attack on public education.

The DFT blocked teachers from fighting back for years, enforcing draconian concessions, allowing the gutting of the city’s education services, school closures and layoffs. When rank-and-file teachers organized sickouts to fight these systematic attacks on educators and the crumbling schools the DFT opposed them. “For too long we have been looking to the union to do something. Now we figured we have to do it ourselves,” a long-time teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site* at the time, summing up the anger and determination of thousands of city educators.

The courageous defiance of the teachers threw the union apparatus into a panic. AFT President Weingarten flew to Detroit to do everything in her power to prevent a full-scale rebellion and strike. In consultation with the AFT national office and Weingarten, the DFT then opted to tack “left,” claiming to defend the protests. The hierarchy worked nonstop to usurp control of the spontaneous movement and corral it

behind Snyder and Rhodes, while pleading with legislators to maintain “collective bargaining,” i.e., their place at the table in the final agreement. They were, in fact, thus rewarded for their efforts.

It is no surprise that the plans for the complete privatization of Detroit schools are not a huge problem for the union. They have long embraced the slogan “reform with us, not against us” and are actively seeking to “organize” charter schools. Just this week the AFT proudly announced that I Can Schools in Cleveland are the first charters in that city to sign up.

Finally, among the rogue’s gallery responsible for this fundamental attack on public education in Detroit, one must add the pseudo left By Any Means Necessary (BAMN) and former DFT President Steve Conn. BAMN and Conn have functioned as a secondary fake-left wing of the union. BAMN blocks the unity of the working class promoting reactionary racial politics, thoughtless provocative stunts and preaching “community control,” by which they mean handing control of the schools to the establishment of corrupt African American business owners and Democratic politicians. Above all, this outfit reinforces illusions in the Democratic Party, the trade unions and capitalism.

The struggle to defend quality public education is a political struggle against both big business parties and the capitalist profit system they protect. The Socialist Equality Party is running Jerry White for president and Niles Niemuth for vice president in the 2016 elections in order to unite the working class and break the grip of the corporate-financial elite over social life. Society can only provide for the right of all to free, equal and high quality education for all by reorganizing the economy on a genuine socialist foundation.

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