

Michigan governor signs Detroit Public Schools dissolution measures

Judge Rhodes, Democrats try to pacify Detroit teachers

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On Thursday, a raucous and angry public meeting of Detroit teachers and Detroit Public Schools (DPS) parents was held at Renaissance High School to discuss the legislative agreement to dissolve the Detroit Public School system as of June 30.

The event was sponsored by Detroit Democratic state representatives and followed the decision of Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder to sign the series of reorganization bills on Tuesday. The unprecedented plan secures the interests of Wall Street bondholders while setting the stage for the privatization of the district, the growth of edu-businesses and a class-based school system.

The event was hosted by Detroit Democratic caucus member Sherry Gay-Dagnogo, a former teacher who has functioned as a mouthpiece for the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) bureaucracy. Throughout the last year, she has utilized her office in an attempt to co-opt the teacher sickouts and damp down opposition to the “new company-old company” reorganization.

Snyder’s appointed DPS “transitional manager” Judge Stephen Rhodes was the featured speaker at the event. He was welcomed by Detroit Democrats who sought to package the unprecedented assault on education as a “fresh start.” The former bankruptcy judge has now been repeatedly parachuted into politically manipulated debt “crises” for the purpose of imposing draconian cuts on the working class—first in the Detroit municipal bankruptcy, then in Puerto Rico and now in the DPS.

Rhodes’ topic was the budget of the Detroit Community School District. Drastically underfunded, the district is basically stillborn. Moreover, all major decisions will be made under the dictatorial control of Detroit bankruptcy’s Financial Review Commission.

Joining Rhodes on the panel was Clark Hill attorney Reginald Turner, who detailed the state’s new measures to victimize teachers engaging in work stoppages or sickouts. DPS Interim Superintendent Alicia Meriweather rounded out

the group.

The Detroit caucus Democrats spent most of meeting telling the audience of approximately 250 parents and teachers to “move on” from their entirely justified anger. Brian Banks (Democrat-Detroit) went further, literally denouncing teachers for not voting in sufficient numbers and “attacking our caucus members on Facebook.” His tirade concluded with repeated shouts of “If you don’t live in Detroit and if you don’t vote Democratic, you have no right to complain.”

The sustained campaign over the last year by Democrats, Republicans and the teachers’ union to support the dissolution of the district and its privatization has alienated the majority of educators. Recognizing the hostility of the crowd, about half of which was teachers, the meeting began with a written list of rules indicating that no one would be allowed to speak and that violators would be removed.

Democratic representative Sherry Gay-Dagnogo attempted to cajole the audience. “It doesn’t mean we’re not angry, but it is what the law is. We, as a people, know how to make lemonade out of lemons, how to persevere,” she insultingly told the group.

“After all,” Gay-Dagnogo counseled, “We have to put our weapons down sometime.” In point of fact, she, the Democratic Party and the teachers’ unions were—far from opponents of the liquidation of the DPS—all vociferous partisans of the Snyder legislation for the dissolution of the 174-year old school district. The only “weapons” which Gay-Dagnogo utilized were directed against teachers. This was literally the case, as she called on DPS police to threaten with handcuffs and physically eject two audience members because they insisted on speaking.

Sitting in the audience silently complicit was DFT executive vice president Terrence Martin. The union has signed on to the deal, grateful to Rhodes & Co. to remain in the dues-collection and bargaining business. Adding insult to injury, on Friday the union emailed the membership that

ongoing contract negotiations will include further cuts to their health care.

The panel explained that the Detroit Community School District has the right to hire uncertified/nonendorsed teachers, the State Reform/Redesign Office will close “failing” schools (a list will appear in September of those potential closures), and class sizes will not be cut, but remain at 38 students per class in grade 6-12.

Clark Hill attorney Reginald Turner described the punitive system of fines under the new law, stating that “employees will bear the burden of proof of innocence, an unusual situation.” He also stated that teachers and administrators will be hired based on “performance and accomplishments” not “steps and lanes,” explaining that the law will actually prohibit taking degrees and length of service into account, with the sole exception being advanced degrees in a teacher’s subject matter.

Gay-Dagnogo feigned concern for the fate of public education, saying, “I cried yesterday.” But she moved right on to introduce financial hatchet man Judge Rhodes in the warmest possible tones. “He has been nothing but kind to me so far,” she stated.

For his part, Rhodes said the new district would provide the best education possible in “a financial sustainable model.” This prompted angry shouts from the audience of “with uncertified teachers.”

The crowd became especially vocal when he told them that their Termination Incentive Pay money was not included in the repayment of debt and would have to be negotiated with the next school board. Rhodes claimed that any teacher retiring between now and January would be repaid, but that the dissolved DPS district was not legally responsible in subsequent years.

These TIP “loans” to the district of nearly \$10,000 per teacher were negotiated in one of the more egregious giveaways by the DFT by former president Keith Johnson, with the assistance of AFT national president Randi Weingarten in 2009.

Rhodes also explained that out of the \$150 million being loaned to the district for start-up costs, only \$25 million will be allocated to the new district. All building repairs and maintenance will have to be paid for out of this grossly inadequate portion. In other words, thousands of DPS students will be condemned to another year in unsanitary, moldy, and unsafe buildings—not to mention that very little if anything will be allocated to lead abatement and the removal of old water delivery systems.

Public education, both locally and internationally, is being targeted by the for-profit industry aligned with both Democrats and Republicans. Nationally this effort has been spearheaded by the Obama administration.

The determination of teachers and parents to defend public education in Detroit requires drawing a balance sheet on the struggles of the last year. In the aftermath of the independently organized campaign of sickouts last winter, the political powers-that-be—Democrats, Republicans, Wall Street and the unions—staged a counteroffensive.

This assault was coordinated at the highest levels—from the Obama administration and his education secretary John B. King, Jr. to Michigan Governor Snyder on down. Judge Rhodes, a highly sophisticated operative already tested by the financial oligarchy, was maneuvered into position. The Democratic and Republican legislators played their predictable parts, the big business foundations weighed in, phony community meetings were held—it was a highly choreographed affair.

But the most insidious role of all was played by the DFT/AFT. The union sought at every critical point to undermine the independent actions of teachers and channel their efforts back into support for the Democratic Party. From the beginning they were prepared to accept any deal—noncertified teachers, charterization of the district, punitive fines for teachers—as long as their well-heeled hierarchy maintained a “seat at the table.”

Enough is enough. The Socialist Equality Party and the WSWS Teacher Newsletter urge teachers to draw these critical lessons and begin to form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and big business politicians to prepare for the next round of struggles.

Above all, what is required is a new political perspective that rejects the demand that public education, and all rights of workers, be subordinated the insatiable profit appetites of Wall Street. Teachers, their coworkers, parents and the entire working class must unite on a genuine socialist program. This is message of the SEP’s presidential campaign of Jerry White and Niles Niemuth.



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