

“Public education is not a business, it is a right”

Detroit teachers and parents speak out against public school reorganization

A WSWS reporting team
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Angry teachers, parents and community members spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters at the June 23 town hall meeting held at Renaissance High School.

The crowd was palpably hostile to the appearance of “transitional manager” Judge Rhodes, the Detroit municipal bankruptcy hatchet man who is reprising his former role. It is not lost on educators that Rhodes vacated the Michigan constitution to destroy pensions and that he is again conspiring alongside the Democrats, Republicans and unions in securing the interests of Wall Street at the expense of workers and young people.

Rhodes was repeatedly heckled by the crowd, especially when he stated that he was in favor of the best education for Detroit youngsters that was “financially sustainable.” When he announced that Detroiters could make suggestions for an informal name for the new school district—an insulting and condescending gesture—he was met with derision by the crowd.

The Democrats on the stage unsuccessfully attempted to distance themselves from the attacks, claiming, “We didn’t write the law.” This didn’t convince many, because the panel completely solidarized themselves with the reorganization. “We wish there were more money,” said lawyer Reginald Turner, claiming nothing more could be done.

Teachers and workers, on the other hand, in many conversations with the WSWS, linked the reorganization of Detroit Public Schools (DPS) district with the national drive for turning education into a profitable business, a process that has dramatically accelerated under the Obama administration.

Wilena Stafford attended the informational meeting out of concern for her daughter, Selena, a student at Renaissance High School. Stafford said, “There needs to be a complete overhaul of the education system from top to bottom. They should not be allowed to do away with certified teachers. Since they made it a law, it will be enforced.

“My family is from Georgia and the school systems there are also all torn apart. It’s charters. The public schools are being dismantled in the same way. My family are all scrambling to find decent schools. It’s a worldwide epidemic.

“Now they are making money with prisons and schools. It’s a shame it’s come to that. None of it is about what’s right for humanity. It’s all about the echelon on top.

“Judge Rhodes is basically working for the 1 percent, not for the betterment of people. It is a very political move. They are like King Kong walking through the villages, destroying as he went. It’s sad—our children won’t have the childhood we had.”

Cassandra Davis, a speech pathologist with 24 years at DPS, said, “There is money in education now. It’s gone from a socialist endeavor to a capitalist endeavor.

“Of course, the capitalists are your legislators, your 1 percenters, the people who pull the strings. They don’t care about these kids. How can you offer educational initiatives that don’t involve educators?

“The people on the ground who are working with the kids know what is best for them. But they are not listening to us because they really don’t care.

“There were a lot of words at the meeting but no real information. I had a ton of questions, including on the TIP [Termination Incentive Plan] money, which teachers were supposed to get back once you separate from the district,” said Davis, referring to the “loans” negotiated by former Detroit Federation of Teachers President Keith Johnson that forced each teacher to give the district \$250 per paycheck until they retired.

“So technically we have separated from the district [since it is dissolved June 30]. Are they going to honor our agreement and give us our \$9,000 in ‘deferred’ wages back?” she asked.

“I do question how we can come up with millions of dollars for the military and come up short for education,”

observed a newly retired DPS educator. “The reason for the sickouts was that education was being run for profit, not for the sake of educating children. We were standing up and protesting for the right to education.”

Denzel said, “First they ramshackled the schools. Then when they started with the ‘good company-bad company’ idea, they were injecting corporate interests into the public school.

“Public education is not a business, it is a right and a service that should be equal and exceptional for every kid, no matter where they live or who they are.

“Now they are talking about the ‘balanced budget’ and getting people to run the schools with ‘business acumen.’ This is running them like a business. It may seem harmless to the general public, but this lends itself to the for-profit corporate model that we see throughout the country, like New Orleans.”

Referring to the mildly different Democratic-sponsored variants on the DPS reorganization, Denzel said, “Even the bills they were negotiating—including the folks on the stage there—did not have enough money for the schools.

“What does this say about the future? To me, the folks who advocated this want an all-charter system in Detroit. You are saying we live in a democracy, but they forced this through a major city—I don’t think so.”

A former General Motors worker said, “There is no way at the end of the day that kids here are going to be able to survive. I don’t think it’s the teachers’ fault. They are dedicated and hardworking, but they need the tools.”

Marcy Taylor, a special education teacher at DPS, explained, “I had all different students who were autistic and emotionally impaired. I quit in February after 21 years because there was too much uncertainty and stress.

“It was the stress every single day from knowing what’s happening to your livelihood. Every other day I was having nosebleeds because my blood pressure was going up. I was feeling abused. There was no caring about what was truly going on with the kids. I am also a DPS parent.

“I supported the teacher sickouts because of the things going on in the schools like the lack of supplies. I had a beautiful building with a beautiful maintenance crew. But there are other buildings I used to work at such as Harding, which is closed now, where I had to clean out my own room and fumigate my classroom every Friday before leaving on the weekend. It was horrible. Those conditions do exist in some of the schools and it’s discouraging.

“There is a lot of inequality. When I went to school we had a lot of opportunities. We had college prep courses, we had music and we had dance. Detroit schools used to be the best in the country. It didn’t matter where you went to school, you still had a quality education. We don’t have that

anymore.”

Referring to the spread of charter schools within DPS, Taylor said, “They call them ‘networks’ within the district, but they are charters. They want to make all the schools charters. The official from New Orleans [Paul Pastorek, former Louisiana school superintendent and school policy adviser to Michigan Governor Snyder] has been here since the fall. Why do we have someone here who made New Orleans a 100 percent charter school system? There’s a reason for that.

“When the letter was leaked in December about making 13 schools charters, Governor Snyder said that he didn’t know anything about it. Yet he did. He had things in place. Everything was in the making. What they planned, they are doing.

“Former emergency manager Robert Bobb reduced the teachers’ contract from 300 pages to 30. He took everything out that pertained to money. So what did we have left to bargain for? Teachers cannot even bargain the calendar. Health care was taken out. It’s really sad when you see what’s going on, and where it is leading. How is this good for kids?”

Rachel, a parent of children attending Detroit Public Schools said, “It is a sad day for DPS. The buildings are falling apart. It is all about money, the haves and have-nots. There is a boom in construction, but the programs that would help young people get off the street are being cut.”

Aliya Moore, who has two children in DPS, said she found the whole meeting “disrespectful.” “We’re always expected to be civil when they’re raping us, basically. The bankruptcy was garbage. The illusion they been giving us is that Judge Rhodes fixed the city, but he cut pensions and privatized. He tried to privatize the Detroit Institute of Arts and people said, ‘Hell no, leave our art alone, you’ve got to find another way.’

“A lot of parents feel the same way about the schools. I was excited about the sickouts. I supported them. I pulled my kids out of school and we protested. But they try to divide us, even as parents, by shifting things one way and telling us what to believe and what not to believe, then this is what happens.”



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