

Detroit teachers angered by contract deal

Marissa Ross
8 September 2016

On Tuesday, Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) teachers attended a mass membership meeting to hear “highlights” of a tentative six-month to one-year contract settlement concluded by the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT).

DFT interim president Ivy Bailey, her local bargaining team, and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Randi Weingarten negotiated the tentative settlement with DPSCD emergency manager Judge Steven Rhodes following the dirty deal that implemented the dissolution of the Detroit Public Schools and the creation of a new district on July 1.

It is significant that AFT President Weingarten lent her assistance in crafting the deal in Detroit, which follows a rotten agreement imposed to prevent a strike by the Cleveland Teachers Union at the end of August. The AFT, the first union to endorse Hillary Clinton for president, is now in a full-court press on behalf the Democratic Party leading up to election day.

The well-heeled union hierarchy is determined to prevent the outbreak of any struggle that would draw attention to the anti-education policies pursued by the Obama administration. They are particularly worried about containing the militancy of Detroit teachers, who demonstrated their readiness to fight in defiance of the union repeatedly over the course of the last year.

Bailey told the hundreds of assembled DPSCD teachers that this was the union’s first contract “without concessions” in a decade. She went on to tout miserable 3 percent bonuses proposed for teachers at the top of the pay scale (less than \$2,000 in most cases). The agreement provides smaller one-time increases for other teachers equal to their next salary step level.

Making the lame argument that this was “real money” in teachers’ pockets, Bailey attempted to placate angry teachers with the time-worn excuse that it was a “tough fight” and “we didn’t get everything we wanted.”

Many Detroit educators, after taking repeated pay and benefit cuts, had set their sights on a 10 percent pay increase to begin to make up lost ground. Instead, these pathetic bonuses—which will be paid from grants, not the general

fund—failed to even cover all DFT represented employees.

“It’s like a slap in the face. It’s like, they’ve taken over \$20,000 away and now they’re just offering a thousand dollars here, \$1,200—I say no,” Gina Hatcher told Fox 2 News, also referring to the fact that the so-called “loan” to the district in the “Termination Incentive Program” will not be repaid under the new agreement.

Bailey was repeatedly interrupted during her presentation by angry teachers who pointed to the years of pay cuts that teachers have endured. One teacher with a master’s degree who joined the district in 2005, told the meeting that she has been stuck on the first pay level for 11 years.

Another teacher denounced the union for failing to do its job. She demanded that the DFT return to the bargaining table to demand all of the loss of pay “plus double,” citing the Biblical injunction. Yet another said she had lost \$20,000 per year as a result of the combination of pay cuts, healthcare cost increases and the union dues increases.

Teachers’ step pay levels have been frozen since 2005. Educators have made “unfreezing the steps” a central demand in nearly every strike action or sickout since that time. But far from “unfreezing” the steps, apparently the union has agreed to tie such pay increases to the passage of a new regressive property tax millage.

The agreement stipulates that if the school district receives additional tax revenues exceeding \$12 million for the 2016-17 school year, teachers will move ahead one full step on the salary schedule. In other words, teachers will continue to fall further behind until the hard-pressed Detroit population can be blackmailed into paying higher taxes. The Cleveland Teachers Union threw its support behind a similar reactionary scheme.

In a further stab in the back, the tentative deal defers the question of healthcare provisions. Teachers are expected to ratify the deal while the union continues negotiations. Last year, former emergency manager Darnell Earley attempted to foist a plan on teachers that would hike deductibles as high as \$8,000 per family. While this was not enacted, teachers have seen a nearly 125 percent increase in premiums since 2009.

The DFT’s audacious move to present a contract without a

healthcare provision indicates that healthcare will most likely involve steep new “concessions,” despite Bailey’s assurances to the contrary. In fact, the interim president admitted there will be an increase in monthly premiums as well as increased deductibles and copays.

The contract sidesteps the critical need for more teachers and smaller class sizes by offering extra pay for teachers to take on a sixth class, up to \$8,000 per year. There are more than 300 classroom vacancies in DPSCD. Class sizes average 40 students, double the recommended size. For educators, adding on a sixth class would compound an already unbearable workload. The contract provides only a minimal “class-size overage funding pool” to incentivize educators, but does nothing to remedy the lack of desks, chairs, or room for more than 40 students.

While the DFT is calling it a “tentative contract,” the deal is entirely subject to the dictatorial Detroit Financial Review Commission. Even if approved, it would only be operative for a few months until the new school board takes over, at which point it could be renegotiated or extended for another six months.

Teachers attending the membership meeting spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The contract didn’t even address my job classification,” Leslie Holsey said. “I’m a salaried position. We—including counselors and social workers—are getting no compensation, no 3 percent, no nothing. The bonuses were negotiated only for classroom teachers that are in steps, not even for subs. But we all pay union dues. [Ivy] Bailey and the negotiating team didn’t even negotiate for us. Our job classifications are out in the cold.

“We’re a fractured union. But as a group, many educators are scared if we go out we’ll be retaliated against, and fired.”

Referring to the fact that the healthcare plan has not been negotiated, Leslie pointed out, “Bailey already said it will be increased deductibles. The cost per month will be nominal, but the deductibles are going up.

“The fact is Judge Steven Rhodes is an emergency manager, no matter what he wants to call himself. He can impose a contract. And the question that wasn’t answered was—has the Financial Review Commission approved this contract proposal?

“The only reason for this new district is that it provides a new credit limit, a new line-item to borrow against. They are now going out for a millage for the new district while we are still paying for the DPS debt. We have four line items for ‘old co’ and now they want to float a new millage. It’s all to chase new money.

“There was a mass transfer of wealth when they took over the DPS. That wealth was transferred out of the school system. At one point DPS was the largest landowner in the

city of Detroit. Education was always a social service, it was never for profit. Now they haven’t educated two whole generations.”

Laura, a 15-year veteran educator, commented, “It’s ‘interesting’ they were bringing up the ‘no more concessions.’ Well, it’s just too little, too late at this point. We’ve lost so much over the past years. This is not even close. The idea of a bonus would be easier to swallow if it were more generous. But this isn’t even half of the 10 percent we are owed...

“Then the contract is only one year. Yes, it’s part of the circumstances, but to get something one time for one year, we could be right back having the same conversation next year.

“That bonus doesn’t even guarantee—why I am soft-peddling it—it does not even begin to cover the increased healthcare costs. It doesn’t cover the out-of-pocket costs I’ve already had this year. When you are making less than you did eight years ago, your budget has been chopped.”

In addition to the union’s preoccupation with the Clinton presidential campaign, the other unmentioned “elephant in the room” was the subject of school closures. As the DFT held its meeting, state politicians were huddling to discuss “all options” necessary to proceed with closing down Detroit schools. Michigan Senate Majority Leader Arlan Meekhof and House Speaker Kevin Cotter have denounced the legal opinion of the Miller Canfield law firm which claims the new district is exempt from the State Reform Office’s mandate to close “failing schools.”

The full-throated support which the DFT has thrown behind Judge Rhodes and Governor Snyder’s reorganization of the district has opened the door, not just to another concession contract impoverishing educators and undermining public education, but to the breakup of the entire school district at the hands of the pro-privatization politicians.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact