

Detroit Federation of Teachers pushes through sellout contract

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The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) announced last week that a tentative contract was ratified by a majority of the membership, claiming a nearly 60 percent approval. The DFT made the decision to abandon the traditional vote at a mass membership meeting instead providing ballots at schools, so there would be no mechanism for rank-and-file verification of vote totals. Even so, at least 40 percent of teachers voted to reject the sellout.

Educators greeted the agreement with anger, skepticism and a dose of resignation in the face of the concerted attempts by the DFT and its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), to derail their struggles over the course of the last year.

The deal included paltry one-time bonuses, limited to less than \$2,000 for most teachers, and failed to restore the Termination Incentive Program's mandatory interest-free "loans," amounting to close to \$10,000 each, which teachers were forced to provide to the Detroit Public Schools (DPS).

The union also accepted the district's demand for a financial punishment of militant teachers who participated in the sickouts last year by agreeing to a "bonus" for educators with three less days off last year.

"Shame on our bargaining team to even allow a divisive 'bonus' to be included that in essence rewards the teachers who didn't participate in the sickouts! Shame on them," posted an angry DFT member on Facebook.

"In the past, union leadership had worked hard to ensure members were not punished by strikes or similar work stoppages...Either our current leadership is on the take or too dumb to see the disingenuous nature of awarding the teachers who never sicked out," he pointed out.

According to teachers, much of the bonus money,

including a \$1,000 merit award, is federal money and does not come from the district, leaving educators wondering why they are included in the contract "highlights" except as part of the cover-up for the lack of a pay raise.

Teachers were particularly outraged that the contract failed to include healthcare. DFT interim President Ivy Bailey told teachers there would be further increases in co-pays and deductibles when the union concluded a separate agreement by the end of the month.

Detroit's Financial Control Review Commission, which has final oversight over all of the Detroit Public School Community District's (DPSCD) monetary policies, approved the contract on Friday—a clear indication that the financial industry will continue to extract its "pound of flesh" from educators in the form of low wages and minimal benefits.

DPSCD Emergency Manager Judge Steven Rhodes—the state-appointed hatchet man of the Detroit municipal bankruptcy and the point man in the reorganization of the school district—indicated his approval of the role of the union. "I'd like to commend the DFT leadership team for their commitment to good faith bargaining. This is another key indicator that our new district, Detroit Public Schools Community District, is moving in the right direction and one step closer to restoring local control to the citizens of Detroit."

This fraudulent mantra of "local control" was also the focus of Bailey's comments on the ratification vote. Recognizing the deep opposition to the contract—including by those who voted for it—she emphasized that the contract was "far from perfect" but said the union would now concentrate on the local school board elections, campaigning for Democrats to win seats in the Michigan House, supporting a

regressive Wayne County millage vote and—last but not least—a chance for members to vote for her as president of the union.

A veteran educator told the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter*, “The contract gives a few dollars and is a setup for what’s to come next year when the elected board takes over in January 2017. Where are the funds going to come from to finish out the year?”

“The state already wants to close ‘failing schools’ before 2019,” she said, referring to the potential closure of as many as 47 of the existing 100 schools in the DPSCD. “Believe me, the fight is still going on! I don’t trust any of them [the union], Ivy [Bailey] and Randi [Weingarten] and the rest... the State either... The corporations are stealing from hard workers, with ‘leaders’ like Ivy and [former DFT President] Keith Johnson helping them. They are working on having just two classes: very rich and working poor.”

The contract was prematurely pushed through for a membership vote without an agreement on healthcare, despite the fact that the district last year attempted to hike deductibles to as high as \$8,000 for families. The overriding concern of the DFT/AFT hierarchy was to get the contract out of the way in order get on with their real concern: hustling votes for Hillary Clinton and local Democrats to ensure their “seat at the table” and well-paid positions in the bureaucracy.

A significant role in the passage of the contract may have Michigan’s ramped up antistrike laws and the role of the courts—in tandem with the union—in suppressing the sickouts.

At the height of the sickouts, two dozen rank-and-file teachers were sued and threatened with fines and/or jail time for their protest. Since that time, the state legislature has strengthened Michigan’s antistrike provisions. The defiance of Detroit teachers, in the aftermath of autoworker contract rejections, portended a wider offensive by the working class and was a direct rebuff to the Obama administration, which had touted Detroit as “ground zero” in education reform nationally. The repressive state measures were therefore welcomed by the DFT/AFT bureaucracy as a means of disciplining the ranks and preventing further struggles that could lead to a direct political confrontation with the Democratic Party.

Meanwhile teachers have returned to the classrooms, now under the DPSCD, to find conditions as dismally

underfunded as within the DPS, despite claims by the district to the contrary. Drove of DPSCD teachers have retired or left the profession due to years of givebacks and unsafe working conditions. The district faces about 300 vacancies, making classrooms more crowded this year than ever and learning conditions as bad or worse than during last year’s sickouts.

“My daughter, on her first day of school, came home and said, ‘There are 60 kids in my classroom,’” a Mackenzie Elementary-Middle School parent told WXYZ news. The parent, Dominique Hister, explained, “I thought she was exaggerating.” But visiting the school, she found children sitting “on counters, chairs, on the table by the teacher.” The mother went to other overcrowded classrooms and saw children sitting on milk crates.

After being contacted by the media, the district arrogantly dismissed such concerns, saying, “[I]t should be noted that exceeding classroom sizes and schools near capacity is a positive indicator that the community is hopeful about our fresh start...”

The new union-imposed contract acquiesces to these impossible learning conditions. It recognizes “class size maximums”—not by insisting that educators have manageable classes—but by providing a small cash incentive to educators forced to teach under these impossible circumstances.

This scandalous state of affairs has been imposed by Democratic and Republican politicians at the behest of the financial elite and for-profit edubusinesses, and facilitated by the policies of the DFT/AFT over years. From former Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm to Barack Obama, state and federal governments have defunded public education and driven school districts into the hands of the financial industry. The well-heeled hierarchy within the DFT/AFT has worked to straitjacket educators and corral them behind appeals to the courts and the reactionary politics of race and phony “local control.”



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