

Union conceals district's takeaway demands from Detroit teachers

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Detroit public school teachers are once again facing demands for sweeping wage and benefit concessions, this time from the newly reconstituted school district. A one-year labor agreement covering nearly 3,000 teachers expires on June 30.

The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) is deliberately concealing the scale of givebacks being demanded by officials of the Detroit Public Schools Community District and the financial review board, which has dictatorial powers over all contracts. On May 16, the executive board of the DFT decided not to bring back to the membership a tentative agreement reached by union negotiators. This was followed by a membership meeting last Thursday, May 18, where DFT President Ivy Bailey, claiming this was the “best deal we could get,” insisted that the union would not reveal the details of its agreement.

Bailey made the absurd claim that the union could not reveal information about the contract because if incorrect information were leaked to the press, it would mean, “the union getting hit with an unfair labor practices suit.”

The DFT president then got around to the real reason, responding angrily to teachers questioning why the union was cutting a deal behind their backs. “We will not negotiate this contract on Facebook!” Bailey declared. The DFT is concerned that teachers will use social media to mobilize against another sellout agreement, just as they organized the wildcat sickout strikes in January and February of 2016 in defiance of the union and then-emergency manager Darnell Earley.

Fearing that widespread opposition by teachers could derail a bipartisan financial restructuring plan for the district, the Republican administration of Governor Rick Snyder and former US bankruptcy judge Steven Rhodes, who replaced Earley as the district's emergency manager, reached a one-year deal with the DFT in September 2016, which sidestepped the issue of health care reductions. Earley had previously demanded a hike in deductibles of as much as \$8,000 per family, on top of concessions already granted by the DFT, which forced teachers to sustain a nearly 125

percent increase in premiums over the previous six years.

At the time of the negotiations, the DFT told teachers that they had no choice but to accept the continued erosion of their living standards and work conditions and that they needed “To Get Real” and “face financial realities”! Teachers were told to forget about restoring the 10 percent pay cut imposed on all school employees or the additional \$10,000 teachers “loaned” the state, let alone a return to a pay scale based on tenure, degrees and credits earned. Step pay has been frozen since 2005.

The DFT and Democrats on the state legislature and in Detroit claimed the passage of the bipartisan school restructuring plan, which ended the 174-year-old Detroit Public Schools district, and the removal of the emergency manager and return to “local control” would lead to more favorable terms for teachers to improve their wages, job security and benefits.

The opposite has been the case. The elected school board and the local Democrats answer to the same banks and wealthy bondholders who carried out the restructuring of DPS to drastically cut costs, get rid of older, higher paid and more skilled teachers, and replace them with inexperienced teachers making substandard wages and benefits. “Local control” only means that local Democrats and the corrupt establishment of politically connected minority business owners can share in the spoils from the expansion of for-profit schooling.

The DFT executive board did not reject the tentative agreement for any principled reason. The DFT has long collaborated in the destruction of the jobs and living standards of teachers, only asking in return that it have a seat at the table to implement pro-business “school reforms” and maintain some base of dues-paying members no matter how miserable their wages and conditions.

If the union executives rejected the deal it is only because the school board's demands are so draconian that the DFT fears it might have another rebellion on its hands. Teachers are determined to restore past concessions, particularly since the school board is boasting that it has a \$100 million

surplus due to teacher vacancies and the liquidation of the district's debts in the bankruptcy.

The DFT knows if it reveals the details of the district's concession demands it will explode the lie that the newly elected school board—whose decisions in any case must be approved by the unelected Financial Review Commission—is no less ruthless than Snyder and the emergency manager.

Last Thursday's union meeting was attended by fewer than 60 teachers. Considering that the meeting was held amid contract negotiations, this amounted to a boycott by rank-and-file teachers who have no confidence in the DFT after decades of wage and benefit concessions. A quiet rebellion has already taken place with teachers making a conscious decision not to pay dues to an organization that has sabotaged their struggles and collaborated in the state, local and federal plans to privatize public schools.

During the 2016 sickouts, teachers used social media to circumvent the control of the DFT. The unauthorized protests over the long-neglected conditions in the schools—vermin, black mold, leaking ceilings—quickly coalesced with mounting protests in Flint, Michigan over lead-poisoned water, which was overseen by the same emergency manager, Earley, who would impose dictatorial control over the Detroit schools. The largest teacher protests occurred during President Obama's visit to Detroit and threatened to highlight the anti-public school agenda of Obama and his handpicked successor Hillary Clinton.

The DFT and its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers, worked feverishly with the Democrats to defuse the teacher protests, with AFT President Randi Weingarten—a super-delegate for Clinton and the Democratic Party National Convention—repeatedly coming to Detroit to suppress opposition and pave the way for the bipartisan restructuring of the public schools, further attacks on teachers and the expansion of for-profit charter schools.

In addition to the continued unacceptable physical conditions in the schools, teachers are faced with evaluations that force them to sacrifice quality teaching time by entering the minutia of each assignment and assessment into the district's computer system. The schools face chronic teacher shortages and a lack of supplies, while educators have lost prep time and face overcrowded classrooms.

Having lost more than a third of its dues-paying members due to the state's "Right to Work" law, which makes union membership and payment of \$80 a month in dues voluntary, the DFT is doubling down on demonstrating its worth to the Democrats and Republicans. As for the school board and the financial powers behind it, they have no intention of returning past concessions to teachers, and are relying on the DFT to impose further rollbacks and privatizations.

Outside last Thursday's union meeting teachers expressed

their determination to fight. "One thing that's nonnegotiable is the 10 percent that was taken away in 2009, said Karen. "I have a doctorate and I'm making less now than with a Master's Degree."

Referring to Trump's education secretary, another teacher declared, "Betsy DeVos is the pits! She is the worst! We have got to get her out. I agree both parties are for the billionaires. We need a party of the working people."

To defend their jobs and living standards and the social right to high-quality public education teachers must take the initiative in their own hands. But they must draw the lessons of the last years. It is impossible for teachers to defend themselves through the DFT—which is a direct tool of the corporate-controlled political establishment.

Teachers should elect rank-and-file committees committed to the broadest mobilization of the working class throughout Detroit to defend public education. At the same time, they must reject the lie that there is no money for decent schools, living wages, secure jobs, health care and a comfortable retirement. The profits of the auto corporations are hitting record highs, trillions are squandered on war and tax cuts, and the top 20 billionaires are worth as much as half of America.

Teachers must make a decisive political break with the Democrats, which, no less than Trump and the Republicans, are the party of austerity, war and social inequality. The working class must be organized in its own politically independent party whose aim is to take power, break the grip of the financial oligarchy that rules America, and reorganize economic life along socialist lines to raise the material and cultural level of the entire population.



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