

The teachers' revolt and the fight for social equality

The WSWWS Teacher Newsletter
14 May 2019

Like teachers across the US, educators in Detroit are angered over stagnant real income and the indifference of corporate-controlled politicians who will not provide adequate resources to address the needs of our students. Three years ago, Detroit teachers were the first to organize sickouts and protests that exposed the crisis of public education to a national and international audience. Since then, hundreds of thousands of educators, from West Virginia to Oregon and Los Angeles to Denver, have walked out of their classrooms to fight over the same issues.

This battle for our children is, in fact, an international one. Last month, 300,000 Polish teachers conducted a 17-day national strike. Over the last 16 months, educators launched strikes in Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Mexico, Argentina, France, the Netherlands and many other countries.

Despite the sugary pronouncements by school superintendent Nikolai Vitti, the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) remains chronically underfunded and understaffed three years after the district's reorganization by an emergency manager.

- Teachers continue to be paid less than they were a decade ago.

- Hundreds of teaching positions remain unfilled and only 44 of 106 district schools are considered fully staffed, according to the district's own figures.

- DPSCD needs at least \$500 million to carry out critical building repairs, like fixing leaky roofs and heating and cooling systems, but state officials refuse to provide the money.

- The lead-in-the-water crisis has still not been solved.

- Teachers spend their own money on supplies and are not given the necessary resources and support to address chronic absenteeism, behavioral problems and

other issues stemming from poverty and barely surviving neighborhoods.

- The district has adopted a new test-based curriculum that runs contrary to learning needs of students and will accelerate the push for merit pay and punitive "accountability" schemes.

- Privately run but publicly funded charter schools continue to rob resources and students from the public schools.

While the city's schools are in dire straits, limitless resources have been handed to billionaires like Dan Gilbert and the Ilitch family for their sports stadiums, upscale housing and other money-making ventures. The state and local government has handed tens of millions in corporate tax cuts to companies General Motors, which is closing plants and bankrupting neighborhoods and school districts. Insofar as they have a plan for Detroit, Mayor Mike Duggan and the new Democratic governor, Gretchen Whitmer, want to develop a small corridor of the city with adequately funded schools, while the rest slowly starve to death.

Every public opinion poll shows enormous popular support for the teacher strikes and for substantial improvements in pay and school funding throughout the country. But the Democrats and Republicans have ignored public sentiment. In at least 12 states, including Michigan, state governments are spending less on K-12 schools today than they did before the Great Recession. In 42 states, teachers are paid less than they were in 2009-10.

Over the last two decades, the two corporate-backed parties have diverted virtually all of society's resources into the bank accounts of the super-rich. Whether it was Bush or Obama or Trump in the White House, both parties find trillions to bail out the financial criminals on Wall Street, fund tax cuts for Amazon and other

corporations, subsidize the charter school industry and wage criminal wars to grab oil and other resources.

A serious struggle is required. Not only must teachers be paid a high wage, but hundreds of billions must be spent to improve schools, finance the most advanced technologies, and make sure that all children—regardless of family income—have access to the highest-quality education.

The biggest obstacles to unifying educators across the country are the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their state and local affiliates like the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT). Allied with the Democrats and led by union executives like AFT President Randi Weingarten (salary \$514,000) and NEA President Lily Eskelsen García (salary \$414,824), whose incomes put them in the top 5 percent of income earners, the unions are hostile to any challenge to the current distribution of wealth.

In order to fight, teachers must draw the lessons of their struggles. The 2016 Detroit sickouts and the teacher rebellion in 2018 and 2019 were initiated from below by teachers on social media and in defiance of the NEA and AFT. Unable to stop the strikes, the NEA and AFT did everything to isolate each struggle, wear down teachers and then sign sellout deals that included minimal pay raises largely funded by regressive taxes or cuts to other vital programs. Weingarten came to Detroit to squash the sickouts and facilitate the restructuring of the school district.

In every case, the union officials proclaimed, “Remember in November,” and peddled the lie that Democrats were the friends of teachers. But the Democrats, including Bernie Sanders and Kamala Harris, are beholden to the giant corporations, just like Trump and Betsy DeVos, and will not carry out any policy that impinges on the entrenched wealth and power of the capitalists.

Teachers require new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by rank-and-file educators themselves, to fight for what teachers, support staff, parents and their children need, not what the big business politicians claim is affordable. These rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood committees should reach out and fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class, including parents and autoworkers fighting against plant closings and concessions this

summer, to organize mass demonstrations and prepare a general strike to defend the social right to high quality public education.

Teachers should reject the racist politics of Equal Opportunity Now/By Any Means Necessary, which only serve to divide Detroit teachers from their sisters and brothers in the suburbs and around the country, and subordinate teachers to what is acceptable to the unions and the Democratic Party budget cutters.

The struggle to defend the right to high-quality public education will require a political struggle by the entire working class against the capitalist profit system, which subordinates every aspect of life to the ever-greater enrichment of the corporate and financial elite.

A fundamental change in society’s priorities will not be accomplished by appealing to the powers that be to pay higher taxes and create a more humane capitalism. Instead, the working class must build a powerful political movement against both corporate-controlled parties to fight for a workers’ government and socialism. The reorganization of economic and political life based on human need, not private profit, will require the expropriation of the ill-gotten fortunes of the rich, a vast redistribution of the wealth and an infusion of resources to raise the material and cultural level of the entire population.

The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* urges Detroit teachers to subscribe to the newsletter and take up this fight today.



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