

Detroit teachers demand action on pay, class sizes and testing

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Over 400 Detroit teachers, who were the first to organize sickouts in 2016 against the crisis in public education, rallied at the school board meeting Tuesday, May 14. Parents and latecomers, prevented from entering by police, demanded to be let into the meeting to speak on the deteriorating conditions faced by their children. Inside, teachers were threatened with expulsion from the raucous meeting as the board seemed uninterested in hearing teachers' concerns.

At a rally prior to the meeting, called by the Detroit Federation of Teachers union, dozens of homemade placards called for raising teacher pay to retain teachers, smaller class sizes and demands to fix the decrepit condition of school buildings, which sparked the protests three years ago. The sickouts were organized by rank-and-file teachers independently of the DFT, which like other unions has colluded with the political establishment in imposing decades of austerity measures.

Speaking later, inside the meeting, union president Terrence Martin merely called on the school board to "step up."

Teachers eagerly took copies of the WSWs *Teacher Newsletter* and expressed great interest in the building of rank-and-file committees of teachers, parents and students to unite all the struggles in defense of public education that have been erupting over the past year, from West Virginia to California, as well as internationally.

A charter school teacher, whose daughter attends a Detroit public school, told our reporters, "The state has cut per pupil spending from \$8,500 to \$7,800 and they expect teachers to do more with less. All teachers—charter and district—are concerned about compensation and class sizes. It's supposed to be one teacher to 25 students, but it's one to 30 or more

everywhere, without additional support. Teachers are also piled on with students that have behavioral and other problems, and that leads to burnout.

"All the politicians promise to spend more but every year they cut the budget."

"The biggest thing is testing," Jacqueline, a teacher with 32 years' experience, said. "They are using the M-Step (Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress) exams and I-Ready computer program to evaluate teachers. On top of that, the classrooms are oversized, with 35 students in grade six and up."

One parent of a Renaissance High School student spoke of the lack of resources. "They say this is a high-tech school, but it really isn't. I attended a suburban school, and we had more resources there years ago. And they still haven't fixed all the problems in the school buildings in Detroit."

Teachers flooded to this meeting after Superintendent Nikolai Vitti provoked their anger by publicly announcing a drastic change in the school year calendar, approved at the last school board meeting April 16. It added five teacher development days, required teachers to report back to work before Labor Day, on August 19, and students on August 26. The majority of teachers attending their union meeting last month had rejected any change in the school year. Vitti announced at Tuesday's meeting that he had rescinded the changes and DFT president Martin attempted to claim credit for the move, but it had been widely reported that the union had given its verbal agreement to the added days last month.

Three years after the reorganization of the Detroit school system into the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), the district remains chronically underfunded and understaffed. Lead continues to poison school drinking fountains. DPSCD

needs \$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.

Between 1995 and 2015, Michigan's per-pupil spending fell by 18 percent in real terms and was "dead last" in the nation for funding growth, according to a recent study by Michigan State University's College of Education. The cuts were implemented by both political parties to fund tax cuts and other subsidies for big business.

Since 2017, over \$400 million of taxpayer money have been handed to the billionaire Ilitch family to build the \$850 million Little Caesars sports arena, including over \$34 million diverted directly from state education funds. Yet Vitti's constant refrain is "funding is limited."

Negotiations have already begun on the union contract, as the current one expires in June 2020. The anger that erupted at Tuesday's meeting has the board as well as the union leaders terrified. Teacher pay in Michigan has declined below the 2011 level, hundreds of teaching positions in Detroit remain unfilled, and millions of dollars continue to be siphoned into privately run charter schools. Teachers feel little has changed since the reorganization of the district and they have been inspired by the wave of teacher strikes across the US and internationally.

Teachers and parents expressed great interest in the call by the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter* for the building of rank-and-file committees in opposition to the unions' sabotage of any united struggle by educators across the country.

A DPSCD teacher and supporter of the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter* spoke during the comment period at Tuesday's meeting. She said teachers should take the fight for their demands into their own hands—that nothing could be gained through pleading with the board or turning to the Democratic Party politicians.

"We are long overdue for teachers to build rank-and-file committees in each school, to include parents, students and all school employees to take forward a struggle in the interest of the working class, not what the politicians say is affordable," she said, before urging teachers and parents to read the statement "The teachers' revolt and the fight for social equality" published by the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter*.

A number of teachers who spoke to the newsletter

outside the meeting hall were relieved to hear that the WSWS opposes the racist politics of Equal Opportunity Now/By Any Means Necessary (ENE/BAMN), a faction of the DFT that has long sought to boost illusions in the union and the Democratic Party. Teachers as well as support personnel told us they thought BAMN's tactics were divisive and disruptive. Many said that workers need to unite against attempts to divide them along racial or national lines.

"All the politicians, Democrats and Republicans, have raped education," the veteran teacher Jacqueline said. "The issue is definitely class, not race. Teachers and poor kids in West Virginia are white, and here, they're mostly black. We're all in the same battle. We need to pick a date and all go out on strike across the world."

Comments by a number of teachers to WSWS reporters expressed a growing understanding that teachers' demands are broadly political. Heather, a middle school teacher with seven years, said, "We have to stand up to the rich and Wall Street. I think they are cutting education because they are trying to dumb down the population. Without an education, kids won't have any future. I've always said workers are treated the way the royalty treated the serfs."

"Teachers are disrespected and not paid well. The bigwigs are making a ton of money and want to privatize schools. We need to rise up and be heard."



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