Michigan governor announces closure of Benton Harbor High School

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7 June 2019

Over 300 students, parents and community members filled the auditorium at Benton Harbor High School Tuesday night to voice concerns and frustration over the announcement of a plan from Michigan's Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer to close down the high school in response to the school district's debt and low academic performance.

The anger at the meeting was palpable, coming from both the audience and the school board members at the head table.

Benton Harbor School Board Secretary Patricia Rush explained to attendees that the governor's office had made a "unilateral decision to close Benton Harbor High School without input from the school board or community," adding that she was "shocked and dismayed."

Another school board member, Joseph Taylor, added, "This is one of the last undeveloped waterfront properties in the city." Benton Harbor High School sits on a large plot of land that runs up to the St. Joseph river, less than a mile away from where it flows into Lake Michigan. The potential for real-estate speculation hangs over every decision about the high school.

Rush indicated that "major but undisclosed business supporters" were behind the decision, and that the shutting down of the high school would lead to "a transfer of wealth from a poor, black community to a wealthy, white community. A deeper part of the story is money, land and jobs." According to the US Census Bureau the city is 89 percent African American and median household income is just $17,301, less than one-third the national rate. A staggering 48 percent of the city's residents live in poverty.

Despite Rush's racial appeal, aimed at confusing and diverting popular anger back behind the same Democratic Party which is dismantling public education, the main issue is class, not race. This has been made absolutely clear by the insurgent struggle of educators across the US and internationally over the last year and half who have been fighting for better pay and more funding for their schools from West Virginia and California to Poland and New Zealand.

While teachers and students seek to defend public education and demand better conditions, the unions, including the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, have worked to isolate each struggle and prevent the development of a national strike movement. In the case of Benton Harbor the Michigan Education Association has backed Whitmer's plan to shutter the high school with union President Paul Herbart declaring it the "best solution for students and families."

This lineup of forces underscores the urgency of the call of the *WSWS Teachers Newsletter*, distributed in a leaflet at the meeting, for all workers and young people who are seeking to defend public education in Benton Harbor and beyond to establish their own, independent rank-and-file committees to fight for the resources which are so urgently required.

The city in southwest Michigan has lost residents every decade since the 1960s, going from a population of nearly 20,000 to less than 10,000 in 2017. The historic home of household appliance maker Whirlpool, Benton Harbor has been economically devastated by layoffs and plant closures over the last 15 years. While the last Whirlpool plant in the city closed in 2011, the Fortune 500 company which marked a revenue of $21 billion in 2017 still maintains its world headquarters nearby in Benton Charter Township.

Republican Rep. Fred Upton, an heir to the Whirlpool family fortune with a personal net worth of more than

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$7 million, has represented the area in Congress since 1987.

The introduction of Michigan's "School of Choice" policy in 1996 led to a steady loss of students from the district, year after year, explained Rush. This created a vicious cycle in which low enrollment led to loss of revenue from the state, which exacerbated all of the problems facing the school district and led to further decreases in enrollment.

Having already lost about $22 million and 406 jobs, the Whitmer administration's plan for the school district would lead to an additional loss of $27 million and 575 jobs from the community, according to Rush. "If we run out of money, it is because the state decides to call up those loans, like a predator… We have money for school improvements which the state has prevented us from using."

Whitmer—a Democrat who campaigned in 2018 as a defender of schools and children—has been quickly exposed as the willing ally of Republican billionaire US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, the nation's most fervent political opponent of public education. Last week, Whitmer's office pointedly refused to uphold Michigan children's right to literacy, opposing a long-running lawsuit demanding proper funding for state schools.

Students at the meeting proudly defended their school from vicious slanders in the local media and from the governor's office. Many sang along when the presenters played a music video, "Get Up," which features four Benton Harbor student performers. The music video includes shots from around the high school and includes the demand: "Forgive the state debt so that our staff/students may finally teach/learn in peace."

The meeting itself was organized as an appeal to the Whitmer administration to have mercy on the school district. A petition which had been drafted by the school board was read aloud.

Whitmer, who was publicly invited, did not attend the meeting Tuesday, instead traveling to Benton Harbor the next day to reaffirm her intention to close down the high school in exchange for "transitional funding," cynically adding, "I am losing sleep over the Benton Harbor children."

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with attendees after the meeting about the world-wide assault on public education.

Sharon, a former school board president, explained the intense pressure bearing down on the district from shadowy business interests. "This school hinders the riverfront development project from Whirlpool. You never see them. You never hear them. But the Michigan Department of Education, the governor's office, they all meet with them in secret."

Curtis, a student at Benton Harbor High School, denounced Governor Whitmer's decision, stating, "She is attacking education."

"I'd hate if I had to move out of this school. I went to a charter school in sixth grade. They don't teach there. If you close down our school, it will hurt the community. We hope the governor forgives the debt."

Sami works as a behavioral specialist with students who need to develop the skills necessary to attend public school. She connected the attack on the high school to the wider assault on educators. "Teachers are being undermined. Salaries and benefits are being cut. There is a clear correlation between quality of care for educators and quality of education. We are nowhere near close to equality in education.

Sami pointed to the trillions spent on war, a fact that one Benton Harbor student raised during the school board meeting. "Our taxes go to war, not to the communities that need it."

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