

Michigan teachers rally to “fund our schools” after 20 years of bipartisan cuts

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Approximately 1,000 teachers rallied at Michigan’s state capitol in Lansing Tuesday to protest more than two decades of bipartisan cuts to school funding. Like their counterparts throughout the US and internationally who have been engaged in widespread strikes and protests, Michigan teachers are determined to fight for significant improvements in wages and school funding and to oppose the privatization of public schools.

The militant mood of educators stood in sharp contrast to the protest sponsors, the Michigan Education Association (MEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Michigan, which sought to turn the event into an impotent lobbying campaign of the state legislature.

Supporters of the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter* distributed a statement, titled “For a socialist policy to fully fund public education,” which calls on teachers to form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions to mobilize educators, autoworkers and all workers to fight for high-quality public education, living wages and other social rights.

The rally featured Michigan’s new Democratic governor, Gretchen Whitmer, whom union officials promoted as a champion of teachers and public education. In reality, Whitmer is calling for a paltry \$526 million, or 3.5 percent increase to K-12 education. Studies have shown that Detroit schools alone would require a half a billion dollars for critical building repairs.

The keynote speaker was National Education Association President Lily Eskelsen García, who has spent the last 18 months crisscrossing the country trying to put out teacher rebellions and preventing them from coalescing into a nationwide strike. García made a few demagogic remarks about Trump’s education

secretary Betsy DeVos, a rightly despised figure because of her billionaire family’s role in nationwide efforts to privatize public education.

The NEA president called for teachers to support Democrats in the 2020 elections and deliberately concealed the role of the Obama administration and Democratic state and local officials across the US who have promoted charter schools and other corporate-backed “school reform” schemes.

The Lansing event failed to attract substantial numbers of Michigan educators unlike earlier Red4Ed rallies in the Carolinas, Virginia, Oregon and other states. The teacher unions deliberately called the rally while teachers in Detroit—the state’s largest district—are still in school. Detroit teachers, who organized wildcat sickout strikes in defiance of the union in 2016, are being told to come to a rally on June 25.

Educators who spoke to the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter* expressed their determination to fight. “I’m from Flint,” Van Fronwiller said. “We need a lot more money. A lot of schools are closing. The amount of money that is being offered is ridiculous and sad. There’s a lot of impoverished youth in Flint. The state needs to fund the schools. Frankly, it’s a travesty,” he said. “It’s not just for us but the kids and their parents,” the Flint teacher continued. “It’s just too little funding. I’m for anything that would help lead the way toward a change.”

Michigan schools have suffered the steepest funding decline in the nation over the last two decades. Teachers have seen a 12 percent fall in real wages since the recession. Meanwhile both parties have showered General Motors, Ford, Dow Chemical and other corporate giants with hundreds of millions in tax breaks.

AFT-Michigan President David Hecker admitted that

Michigan is now 43rd in the nation in student-teacher ratio and 45th in its support for higher education. Nevertheless, he called Whitmer's plan—which would largely be funded by a regressive gas tax—"a great step in the right direction" and "a moral document." Hecker said Michigan now had a governor who "knows it is imperative to fund our future."

Hecker did not say anything about Whitmer's efforts to blackmail the Benton Harbor school district to close the only high school or face dissolution—a move the MEA has endorsed. Rather than injecting the necessary funds to properly staff and supply the district—which has long been impoverished from plant closures by Benton Harbor-based Whirlpool Corporation—Whitmer is using the district's financial crisis to escalate the attack on teachers and education.

Abigail, a teacher from North Berrien, told the WSWS, "We're from the town just north of Benton Harbor. It's a huge ordeal right now. We are in a very rural, low-income area, and we are worried that they'll attempt to shut down and charterize the schools in our district the same way that they did in Benton Harbor."

Jim, from Kalamazoo, was also appalled. "I live close to Benton Harbor. I know that that school district needs the most funding. It's a very depressed area." He continued, "My youngest son specifically chose to go to Three Rivers School District so that he could be in the choir program, but the administration was trying to defund a lot of the arts programs. The arts program helped him get through a lot of school—without them he might have dropped out. He had a lot of academic issues but being in the choir program helped him connect with people and excel in other subjects too."

"Teachers get the blame for everything," Mary, a Detroit-area elementary school teacher, told the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter*. "We don't get administrative support. I can't even get substitutes. Substitute teachers are underqualified because nobody wants to be a teacher anymore due to the horrible conditions we face. My own three children are only able to get quality education because I'm an educator."

A teacher who has taught in the Detroit suburb of Novi for more than a dozen years said that schools have been declining for decades. "It's been going down especially since [former Democratic governor Jennifer] Granholm was in office. I have seen so much devolution of education by both Democrats and

Republicans.

"Proposal A [a 1993 legislative measure that cut 64 percent of the statewide education budget, substituting regressive taxes to fund schools] was a disaster. There was no equity for the schools. The funding of my district went way down.

"I want to see the proper priority in funding provided for education. Teachers have a voice, and I believe we should have people making decisions who actually know what they are talking about when it comes to education."

Carla, a retired special education teacher, added, "Special needs kids are the ones who need funding the most. I know from experience that special education and the arts are always the first to have their budgets cut right away. Because nobody ever sees these students.

"Coming out of school with \$80,000 in debt is not a good thing," Carla added. "My son is going back to school at Lansing Community College right now and I worry. Teachers spend a lot of money out of our own pockets to support their students. It's not even just supplies—teachers will even feed their students because it is impossible to teach a hungry kid. Some kids don't have enough food at home, and we have to deal with that. Now we can't even take that out of our taxes."

"I started in 1994," said another educator. "At that time, the funding and the benefits were enough for teachers to make a fairly middle-class living. Since then, we had Proposal 8, which was supposed to make funding available across-the-board from the state. Instead some districts never got out of that low-level funding state while the lowest got a little boost. Over the past 10-15 years, we have seen a systemic decline. What was allocated for public education was taken away from community colleges while corporations got tax breaks."



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