

“This is a class question... All students should have equal access to education”

Second of two “Fund Our School” rallies held in Michigan

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On Tuesday, June 25, the second of two rallies by public school teachers was held in Michigan’s capital, Lansing, to demand greater funding for education.

The rally was organized by the Michigan Education Association (MEA) and the American Federation of Teachers-Michigan (AFT-MI). The turnout of a few hundred teachers, including around 100 from Detroit, was only a pale reflection of the widespread discontent among educators in the state, which has seen the deepest fall in school funding in the US over the last quarter century.

The unions did little to encourage a large turnout and their stated aim of delivering postcards to the offices of legislators currently in recess did not inspire teachers to come. In 2016, Detroit teachers were among the first to carry out wildcat “sickouts” over lack of pay and poor classroom conditions, an action that would be repeated across the US and lead to statewide strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and other states over the last 18 months.

The postcards teachers were supposed to deliver included the demand that the legislature pass the budget proposal of newly elected Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, who was a featured speaker at both rallies. Union officials promoted Whitmer—who is currently threatening the impoverished school district of Benton Harbor with dissolution if officials do not close the lone high school—as a champion of teachers and public education.

Whitmer’s budget proposal calls for a paltry \$526 million, or 3.5 percent, increase to K-12 education, which will be funded through regressive gasoline taxes.

Studies have shown that Detroit schools alone would require a half billion dollars for critical building repairs. In addition, the Detroit Development Authority (DDA) is expected to rob at least \$726 million in school property revenues through 2051 for “economic development” for businesses and wealthy Detroit residents to continue to enjoy the recently gentrified downtown.

In addition to providing a political cover for Whitmer, union officials promoted the lie that the election of more Democrats in 2020 would reverse the attacks on education by Trump and his billionaire education secretary and Michigan resident Betsy DeVos. In fact, the eight years of the Obama administration saw the destruction of the jobs of hundreds of thousands of school employees, a record expansion of charter schools and the scapegoating of teachers for the educational problems caused by poverty and decades of school funding cuts.

The Obama administration’s 2009 restructuring of the auto industry also had a devastating impact on education in Michigan. GM, which pays no federal taxes and receives millions in state tax cuts, is closing two plants in the Detroit area.

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. These basic democratic rights will be won through a socialist

redistribution of wealth in the interest of the population, not a handful of oligarchs.

Comments made to WSWS reporters reflected the growing political radicalization of teachers who have been at the forefront in the wave of strikes that have spread across the US and the world.

Jenn, from the Detroit suburb of Warren, said access to quality education in America is “a class question.” Educators, she said, “teach students from diverse backgrounds. All students should have equal access to education, and resources within the classroom, within their schools and within their communities. We have to consider what some kids are going home to, or what they are not going home to, at night. What do they need? So, all kids don’t have access to what other kids do such as healthcare, food, a place to sleep, support at home. Some kids have parents working late hours and so there is no one to help them with their homework. Things which we might expect not all children are getting.”

Her coworker Heather added, “We cannot assume that students will have what you and I had growing up. When they are lacking it is hard for them to learn. There are all of these other things that we don’t have control over as educators. We are educators, but it is also our job to take care of them. They are with us for more time than they are with their own families. So, without adequate funding, how can we take care of them? With the current funding we use our own money, but then how do we pay our own bills and take care of our family?”

“We need people making political decisions that have firsthand experience teaching in schools, not those who don’t understand what’s going on in the schools. They are so far removed.” Both teachers nodded in agreement to the WSWS reporters’ suggestion that teachers organize rank-and-file committees to fight in the interest of teachers and students who have been left to fend for themselves by the unions.

The young teachers said they were surprised by two things when they started several years ago. “We were surprised by how deep the social crisis is,” said Jenn, “And how low teacher pay is,” Heather added.

Kaylee, a bilingual teacher, explained that her school “gets no funding at all for bilingual education.”

Louis, a social studies teacher, became animated about the demand of the *Teacher Newsletter* statement

for a radical redistribution of wealth away from the super-rich and the squandering of resources on war in order to fund vital public services such as education. “You say redistribution, I call it allocation. In my economics course I showed how we can take a portion of the Pentagon budget and pay off the deficit and increase social spending, and the US would still have the largest military in the world. If I can figure that out, then think tanks know it, they just don’t want to do it.”

Rachel Sylver said teachers need to be heard and valued. “Education is the basis for the future,” she said. When asked about the 45 cents per gallon gas tax, which will hurt workers the most, Rachel responded, “We see lots of families struggling to keep food on the table. That money should come from somewhere else, not from the workers.”

A Detroit teacher of over twenty years echoed this sentiment, “The taxes for the roads should be a corporate, not an individual, tax. Why are they giving all these corporate tax cuts to companies that are benefiting from coming to Detroit anyway? The tax breaks should be used to fix the roads and for education and to benefit the area, not as giveaways for the rich.”



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