

Democrats promote right-wing, racist politics

Michigan Governor Whitmer ties fate of Benton Harbor High School to test scores

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2 July 2019

After an outpouring of public anger against Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer's plan to shut down Benton Harbor High School (BHHS), the Democratic administration has announced a new, tentative agreement with the Benton Harbor Area Schools Board of Education.

This announcement came weeks after the city's school board members rejected Governor Whitmer's original offer, under pressure from the massive opposition from teachers, students, parents and community members.

Whitmer's original "offer" was an ultimatum: close down BHHS or the state would take control of and dissolve the financially plagued school district.

The new offer ties the fate of the high school and possibly the district to performance benchmarks on standardized tests as well as financial obligations. Benton Harbor Mayor Marcus Muhammad told ABC 57 in South Bend, Indiana that the academic test score performance benchmarks constitute an unrealistically rapid transformation of the district, and that they were "a trap."

While the details of the agreement have not been made public, the *Detroit News* reported a statement from Whitmer spokeswoman Tiffany Brown: "Representatives from the governor's office and the Department of Treasury had a productive meeting with Benton Harbor school board members regarding a tentative joint plan that requires the district to meet attainable benchmarks and goals to show improvement in academic outcomes among Benton Harbor area students while stabilizing the finances of the district."

Brown added that the state "has identified national experts who have experience turning around school

districts that are struggling and we would like to engage in a day of learning alongside the board and community partners."

The school board will make an announcement on the tentative agreement later this week.

As the fate of Benton Harbor was decided by the Whitmer administration behind closed doors, proponents of racist politics have intervened to obscure the class issues and promote racial divisions within the working class.

The *Detroit News* recently published an op-ed by Bankole Thompson which attempts to use the events surrounding BHHS to prove that the interests of teachers and the working class more broadly are in conflict with the interests of blacks.

In his article headline, "In Benton Harbor, labor's interests run counter to blacks," Thompson notes that the MEA was an early supporter of the initial plan from the Whitmer administration. Therefore, Thompson argues, the threat of the Benton Harbor school closure "underscore[s] how the interest of unions have sometimes conflicted with the real issues of inequality that resonate in black communities."

The MEA's position certainly underscores the role of pro-capitalist trade unions in exacerbating social inequality. MEA President Paula Herbart said the original deal was the "best solution for students and families."

But Thompson wants his readers to believe that social inequality is a racial issue rather than one of social class. Rather than explain the underlying economic changes that have led to the transformation of the trade unions, Thompson obscures the underlying material causes by promoting anti-scientific, racist

conceptions.

To this end, Thompson falsifies the history of the labor movement with a passing reference to “the days when labor straddled the fence by paying lip service on racial equality issues.” In fact, militant trade unionist movements of the 1930s and 1940s, led for the most part by socialist minded workers, were at the forefront of the fight against racism, and their struggles gave a powerful impetus to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

In the midst of a global surge of teacher strike activity which has lasted over a year, the promotion of racialist politics in the current fight for BHHS should be understood similarly: it is a different tactical approach to the same capitalist strategy of dividing the working class along racial lines.

Chalkbeat Education News published an article titled, “The roles of race, politics, and party in Benton Harbor, where Michigan’s governor wants to shutter the high school,” featuring an interview with political scientist Domingo Morel, who has recently published a book *Takeover* about state-takeovers of municipal finances, as in Benton Harbor, Flint, and Detroit.

Morel says that for him, the decisive factor in the all of these anti-democratic maneuvers is race. “Number one, you have a significant African-American population.”

According to Morel, the bleeding dry of municipal finances can best be explained by racism. “Takeovers emerged at a time in the 1980s when black communities were fighting for their resources, primarily through the courts. Once that starts to happen, this is when the takeover policy kind of emerges—precisely when communities across the country are winning these cases to provide the resources that they need to provide an education. When the issue becomes resources, then there’s an increasingly hostile relationship between state governments, who are reluctant to give up the resources, and the city governments running schools.”

Morel attempts to obscure the material, economic causes for financial crises which plague former industrial centers. The Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit and the Attack on the DIA and Pensions, organized by the Socialist Equality Party in 2014, provided a detailed examination of the material, economic causes behind the attack on Detroit workers

by international finance capital.

Students and parents have voiced concerns about their students being sent to other, predominantly white, districts outside of Benton Harbor. From this starting point, the proponents of racialist politics conclude that race is the decisive factor in the battle to keep BHHS open.

While it is certainly the right of Benton Harbor students to attend their own school, racial politics cannot offer a fighting perspective for teachers and students to defend themselves from this attack. In the first place, this perspective cannot adequately explain the attacks on public education, which are part of a global assault by the capitalist class. More importantly, the injection of racial politics only serves to strengthen the position of the capitalists by pitting white and black workers against each other.



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