

# Four months before 2020 contract fight: Detroit schools superintendent tells teachers “no increases”

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25 February 2020

“There can be no re-occurring increases beyond this year,” Superintendent Nikolai Vitti told Detroit public school teachers, whose contract expires June 30. But while the political establishment claims that there is “no money” to fund public schools, the Detroit-based automakers have received billions of dollars in local tax concessions, even after ten years of record profits.

Vitti threw down the gauntlet as negotiations begin on a new three-year deal between the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) and three unions, the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), the Detroit Association of Educational Office Employees (DAEOE) and the Detroit Federation of Paraprofessionals (DFP). The unions, with 6,000 members combined, are jointly bargaining for the first time.

However, these contract talks will cover only a portion of teachers in the city. Nearly half of Detroit students attend privately operated but publicly funded charter schools, many of which are for-profit, and almost all of which are nonunion. Former US Secretary of Education under Obama, Arne Duncan, proclaimed Detroit “ground zero” in school “reform,” as managers shut schools and turned them into charters.

In 2015-16, Detroit teachers organized rolling wildcat “sickouts” in defiance of the unions and Democratic Party officials, drawing worldwide attention to filthy, rodent-infested and crumbling classrooms in the city. Organizing independently across social media, the educators also highlighted the years of attacks on educators’ living standards under various Emergency Managers imposed by both Democrats and Republicans.

In 2020, all these problems persist across the 50,000-student district.

Vitti was installed as superintendent in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Detroit Public Schools under Michigan Governor Rick Snyder and US bankruptcy judge Steven Rhodes in 2016, who previously oversaw the 2013 Detroit

bankruptcy, where he oversaw massive cuts to public spending. Dubbed the Detroit bankruptcy “part 2,” the reorganization of the schools into a “new” district, DPSCD, secured the interests of state bondholders, but left the schools criminally underfunded and without the means to either adequately pay educators or fix decrepit buildings. The unions not only endorsed but campaigned for the treacherous deal.

Salaries are so dire that Detroit Federation of Paraprofessionals president Donna Jackson admitted that an increase in the minimum wage to \$15 per hour would be a “lift.” New hires for paraprofessionals “are near minimum wage. It’s not an attractive salary to try to feed your families, pay for health care, trying to pay bills and a lot of that is being subtracted out.” Here, Jackson inadvertently calls attention to the unions’ abject refusal to fight over decades.

As for first-year teachers in DPSCD, they begin at about \$38,000, with a measly \$1,000 yearly increase, significantly less than the statewide average, itself notoriously low. With the collapse of funding for education and six straight years of declining average teacher salaries in the state, the number of college students studying to be teachers is down more than 60 percent. Teachers across Michigan also say their healthcare costs are rising faster than salaries.

Chronic teacher shortages mean classrooms are without certified teachers, the use of sometimes inadequate “alternative” credentials and widespread reliance upon long-term substitutes. Secretaries, clerical staff and paraprofessionals are sometimes called upon to take charge of classes when subs cannot be located. Student education is being systematically downgraded as teachers are “voting with their feet” and leaving the profession in growing numbers.

With the full support of Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, the DPSCD administration is now attempting to tie the fate of city schools to regressive tax millages set to

appear on the November ballot. In other words, they are demanding that residents in one of the poorest large cities in America foot the bill for minor school building repairs or a modest salary bump for educators.

For 2020, there are multiple ballot attempts to impose tax hikes in the name of education funding in Detroit:

\* A two-mill “enhancement millage” for Wayne County schools, which previously provided a small pot of money for schools to use for technology, reducing class sizes or fixing buildings. A new state law requires that should the millage pass this year, it will be shared with charter school operations.

It was this millage that Vitti referred to in ruling out pay increases, saying, “We have to begin to speak with one voice and provide clarity that there can be no re-occurring increases beyond this year due to the fact that this enhancement millage will have to be renewed.”

\* By far, the largest regressive tax is an 18-mill operating millage. Since the restructuring of the public school system in 2016, the \$70 million generated annually by these millages goes, not to running the schools, but to pay off bondholders’ debt.

This millage expires December 31, 2022, but August 2020 is the first opportunity by the district to seek voter renewal; if it fails, they will continue to push advertising dollars into generating support. If further attempts fail, bondholders are empowered to seek a judgment against all city residents for payment. The debt is not scheduled to be paid off until 2027, effectively draining the bulk of all “education” millage money.

\* A one-mill tax countywide earmarked for after-school and summer programs across Wayne County has been ruled off the ballot due to a technicality. Nearly 90,000 signatures were submitted to the Wayne County clerk’s office before the deadline but it will not appear on a March 10 ballot. However, this regressive measure, supported by Democratic Mayor Mike Duggan, Wayne County Executive Warren Evans and the big business-dominated Skillman Foundation, may still be resurrected for the November elections.

Earlier this month, Vitti proposed \$25 million for repairing buildings which pose “immediate safety-to-life issues.” His proposal covers 14 schools with boilers past their life expectancy that have failed in the last two years, 19 buildings with cracked pavement and eight buildings with leaking roofs in classrooms.

This is “literally a drop in the bucket,” to use Vitti’s own words: a 2018 facility audit found the district requires more than \$500 million to repairs its buildings. This figure is expected to soar to \$1.4 billion by 2023. At the time of the audit, 30 percent of buildings were rated “unsatisfactory” with another 20 percent as “poor.” In other words, half the

school buildings in Detroit have been deemed inadequate.

In addition to pay and working conditions, educators are incensed by overcrowded classes, pervasive standardized testing, a state mandate to hold back third-graders who fail reading tests, and new punitive evaluation policies which include student ratings of teachers.

Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer is pursuing a ban on “lunch shaming,” or refusal to serve students in the cafeterias whose lunch accounts are in arrears. In some cases, school personnel literally throw lunches in the trash when the student tries to check out. This crisis will now be greatly compounded with the Trump administration’s slashing of funds to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

However, this is only a fig leaf designed to conceal her abandonment of pledges for substantial increases to K-12 budgets and universal pre-K. Whitmer proposed only \$1 million to address the problem of hungry students. According to Whitmer, schools are to make up the gap through fundraising, “but not more than two times as week” and by begging for philanthropic donations.

While public education has been cut to the bone, Michigan has provided lavish tax credits to Ford, GM and Fiat Chrysler and other billionaire developers and major corporations over decades. In 2014, the value of GM’s tax credits alone was \$2.1 billion.

Detroit educators cannot limit themselves to what big business and politicians claim is “affordable,” but must continue their struggle to fight for what students and teachers need. The WSWS Teacher Newsletter calls on Detroit teachers to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to organize this struggle. The committees will provide the means to link up with educators in the United States and throughout the world who are engaged in a global strike wave in defense of public education.



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