

Detroit schools chief Vitti gets pay raise, as unions initial unsafe reopenings and poverty pay for staff

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Detroit schools are presently set to reopen for face-to-face instruction in the coming weeks, a measure which will endanger countless lives as it coincides with the expected post-Christmas surge of COVID-19 infections and deaths. Following a consultation with the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) Superintendent Nikolai Vitti announced in a memo to staff that in-person learning will begin January 11, with the option of opening learning centers beforehand.

In other words, as the state nears a half million COVID-19 cases and over 12,000 deaths, the education unions continue their partnership in the homicidal policy of reopening schools. In September, the DFT defied a “safety strike” vote by over 90 percent of teachers and instead signed a letter of agreement with Vitti to implement his back-to-school policy.

For her part, Michigan’s Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer reversed her mandatory closure of high schools on December 18, paving the way for a full resumption of in-person learning at K-12 schools.

Toeing this Democratic Party line, the unions have not only blocked a struggle against the forced return to schools, but they have agreed that it continues to be done at poverty-level wages. The week before Christmas, DPSCD settled one-year contracts with six support staff unions. The insulting deal pushed by the unions provides two percent pay increases and \$2,000 bonuses to some 2,700 workers across 133 job classifications. To make matters worse, cafeteria workers were told that they would not even receive the two percent raise because of “revenue shortfall,” and instead they received \$1,000 in “hazard pay.”

The deal, purportedly reached after months of

“negotiations,” means near-impossible living standards for support staff. In return for putting their lives on the line, many support workers make at or below minimum wage, with hourly wages as low as \$9.25 an hour. In a self-indictment of the union’s long role in suppressing opposition among workers, Detroit Federation of Paraprofessionals president Donna Jackson previously noted, “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.”

Most egregiously, contracts do nothing to protect workers from the deadly reopening of schools being enforced across the state by the Democratic governor.

Many support staff have been forced by the school administration to continue working in unsafe buildings since June. They were told that their upcoming contract would include a vague amount of hazard pay, but meanwhile they needed to report for work or lose their jobs. Vitti tried to justify this policy by noting the requirement “is not a decision unique to DPSCD.” He pointed to other Wayne County districts pursuing the same irresponsible policies, affecting large numbers of low-paid workers.

Moreover, the district warned that next year’s contracts will be contingent on Michigan’s K-12 budget, under conditions where state budget shortfalls due to the pandemic are forecast to be massive. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) has estimated a cumulative \$555 billion shortfall nationwide over state fiscal years 2020-2022, while the recently signed federal “relief” measure allocates only one-tenth of that amount to schools.

On the other end of the economic spectrum, Superintendent Vitti has been rewarded for his hard-

line policies of keeping schools open to the greatest extent possible. He specifically demanded that all K-8 schools stay open so that parents could work, and even objected to the shutdown of face-to-face learning in November when the virus began spreading like wildfire throughout schools.

For services rendered, not only was Vitti's contract renewed two years early (making him the longest-serving superintendent in recent history), but he was also given a \$10,000 raise, putting him at \$322,000 annually. In addition, effective July 2022, the district will contribute \$12,500 to a tax-sheltered annuity for Vitti after each quarter of every year he is employed.

While food service workers, paraprofessionals and other school workers were told there was a "revenue shortfall," no expense was spared to retain the reactionary superintendent.

At the December 8 school board meeting where Vitti's contract was adopted, many educators angrily objected, forcing the gathering to stay in session for over five hours, past 11pm.

At the meeting, a member of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee addressed the educators, parents, students and community members at the meeting, providing a way forward to unify the working class against the homicidal return to school.

"I am a teacher from the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee," she identified herself. "We are spearheading the fight to close all schools, stop the spread of COVID-19 and save lives throughout the state and region. We call on educators, students, parents, and all workers across Michigan to join us now at wsws.org/edsafety and take up its demands. Fight for rank-and-file committees in your local workplaces."

She concluded, "While the priorities of the school board are Vitti's pay increase, our priority is the independent mobilization of the working class to stop the pandemic and close the schools."

The unions—the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), the Teamsters, American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), Detroit Association of Educational Office Employees, Detroit Federation of Paraprofessionals, and the International Union of Operating Engineers—have all lined up with the demands by automakers and Wall Street that schools reopen while the pandemic escalates.

Most egregiously, paraprofessionals have been sent in

to staff learning centers by their union even when in-person classes were suspended. Last September, Detroit students protested the unsafe conditions in classrooms and the treatment of school workers.

Cass Tech student Hafiza explained that DPSCD tried to convince students to return to schools "by claiming that this virus would not affect our age group." She also exposed Vitti's claims that during summer school sessions the classrooms were being cleaned regularly and that the ventilation system had been fixed.

She noted that the school staff reported that they "were forced to clean rooms themselves because no one came to clean for them. The staff then exposed how the district lied about reconstructing the ventilation systems, to which the board has not responded."

Having proved himself to the automakers and other business concerns by strong-arming educators into a return to school, Vitti is not alone in cashing in. This has become a pattern throughout the pandemic, as Democrats and Republican administrations alike have demanded the return to work.

In Memphis, Tennessee, the Shelby County Schools board extended Superintendent Joris Ray's contract for two years to 2025 and increased his annual salary from \$285,000 to \$293,550. In Georgia, the Bulloch County Board of Education has voted to approve a two-year contract extension through July 2024 for Superintendent of Schools Charles Wilson. Wilson's pay has increased from \$180,356 in his first year to \$187,643 beginning July 2021. The Newark, New Jersey school board also recently approved a two-year contract extension for Superintendent Roger León.

We urge all education workers in Detroit and across Michigan who seek to save lives, close schools and defend their rights to join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today at wsws.org/edsafety. Contact us today and build the Educators Rank and File Safety Committee Facebook group.



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