

The firing of Detroit teacher Nicole Conaway: A warning to educators everywhere

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Are you a Detroit teacher? Contact us to discuss the victimization of Nicole Conaway and the fight to protect lives during the pandemic and to oppose school closings.

On April 12, the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) school board voted 5-to-1 to fire Nicole Conaway, a high school science teacher and 15-year veteran of the district, for “abandoning her post.” The board terminated Conaway after repeatedly refusing her requests to teach virtually from home due to her preexisting health issues and danger of COVID-19 infection.

The firing is politically motivated. Conaway is a leader of the organization By Any Means Necessary (BAMN) and has publicly opposed in-person learning during the pandemic. Despite our fundamental political differences with BAMN, the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (MERFSC) urges educators to oppose this victimization and demand Conaway’s reinstatement with full back pay.

This vindictive action is aimed at intimidating and silencing all opposition to the district’s abandonment of COVID protections amid a new surge of Omicron subvariants. The district also wants to prevent opposition from educators, parents and students to its recently announced plans to close schools and slash funding.

The firing was a travesty of justice. School officials claim they accommodated Conaway’s health concerns by offering her a position at the district’s Virtual School. However, the district requires teachers to physically go into a school building to teach online, exposing them to infection from other teachers and administrators. Teachers who transfer to the Virtual School also lose their positions at previous schools, even though they may have taught there for years.

Doctors wrote letters explaining that Conaway needed to work virtually from her home due to her “recurrent maxillary sinusitis, allergies and chronic asthma.” This condition put her at acute risk of “pulmonary complications if infected with COVID-19,” the doctors wrote.

The school board rejected this. They also denied that Conaway had any protection under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), claiming that asthma and allergies

were not recognized “disabilities.” Conaway took legal action but a US district court judge in Detroit threw out her suit against the district for discriminating against workers with disabilities and denying them proper work accommodations.

Conaway has been abandoned by the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), which has sabotaged every struggle by teachers to protect themselves and their students during the pandemic. Far from opposing this attack, the DFT welcomed it as a means of beating back the growing rebelliousness of educators.

A week after the firing, DPSCD Superintendent Nikolai Vitti told the Chalkbeat website, “The federal and state [government] and their health guidance are no longer naming COVID as a public health crisis.” He also announced at a school board meeting that COVID testing would be significantly reduced in the 2022-23 school year.

Teachers and students, however, continue to get sick in the district’s poorly ventilated and crowded schools. Nearly 8,000 people have died in Wayne County and 36,000 in the state but Democratic city officials have kept schools open so parents can be sent to work. Factory management has bitterly complained about high absentee rates due to health and child care concerns.

In addition to lifting all restrictions, school authorities are accelerating plans to close schools and funnel more public money into charter and other for-profit education businesses. In February, the board announced a “Facility Master Plan” or FMP, which includes the closure, sale or demolition of at least a dozen schools.

At a meeting of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee on Saturday, the MERFSC passed a resolution opposing the victimization of Conaway.

It read:

The MERFSC demands the reinstatement of DPSCD educator Nicole Conaway. It condemns the actions of the Board of Education on April 15 to fire

her on the fraudulent grounds of “abandoning her post.”

The action by the Board of Education against a 15-year educator and long-time member of the political group “By Any Means Necessary (BAMN)” is an act of political retaliation and intimidation. While we have fundamental differences with the politics of BAMN, Conaway’s firing is an attack on the rights of all educators.

Conaway, a vocal critic of both DPSCD’s COVID policies and budget cuts, is the immediate target. But the real aim of the campaign against her is to suppress the broad anger among educators over the deadly return to schools, the ending of contact tracing, lack of even minimal mitigation measures in schools and the ongoing drive for school privatization.

The Detroit Federation of Teachers has refused to defend her and has issued no official statement on her firing. This is no accident since the union negotiated the rotten deal with DPSCD under which Detroit educators were forced back into unsafe classrooms. Nevertheless, BAMN continues to insist that teachers must subordinate their struggle to the straitjacket of the pro-business AFT, an organization which enforces the demand that teachers be on the job, no matter the cost in lives.

The violation of Conaway’s rights is straightforward. She requested to teach remotely in light of both the continuing risk of SARS-CoV-2 and her underlying medical conditions. These were substantiated by her doctor. The Board of Education denied this accommodation claiming she had no rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Further it denied her a request for Family Medical Leave (FMLA).

The MERFSC insists that all educators have the right to such accommodations to defend their lives. Districts across the US have trampled on the ADA, FMLA and basic human rights throughout the pandemic under conditions when 43 percent of American teachers live with preexisting conditions, such as asthma or diabetes, which make them at high risk of severe effects from COVID-19.

Hand-in-hand with keeping schools open, despite continued community transmission, educators are being threatened with a loss of their job for seeking accommodation. For example, Chicago Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot denied 42 percent of requests by educators to be exempted from teaching in-person on health grounds in December 2020, according to

records analyzed by the WSWs.

The MERFSC calls for educators to oppose the firing of Conaway and to take up the fight for independent rank and file organizations to defend our rights, including:

- **Implement every public health measure necessary to contain and eliminate COVID-19 transmission, including distance learning, masks, vaccines and air filtration!**

We demand the temporary shutdown of schools and non-essential businesses—with full compensation for lost income—along with mass testing, contact tracing and the universal provision of high-quality masks.

- **Full funding for public education!**

We demand universal access to high-speed internet, food security, mental health care, special education support and all other resources necessary to provide the highest quality public education for students and teachers.

- **An immediate 40 percent raise in pay to make up for the decline in real wages over the last five years and monthly cost-of-living adjustments to protect paychecks from the ravages of inflation.**

- **For free speech and the protection of democratic rights from right-wing censorship in the classroom!**

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