

Candidates in Detroit Federation of Teachers elections offer no way forward for educators

Nancy Hanover

23 November 2022

Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) union elections are taking place with voting scheduled to end November 25. Detroit teachers face many struggles, including against the continued spread of COVID and other infectious diseases in their classrooms, the devastating impact of poverty and social inequality on their students, and the continue corporate-driven assault on the jobs, wages and working conditions of educators. None of the contending slates in the election, however, have the slightest answer to the bipartisan onslaught on teachers and public education.

The DFT is holding the election in a typically bureaucratic and undemocratic fashion, with many teachers complaining publicly about not receiving their ballots and being deprived of the right to vote. The DFT faction in power, United for Teachers Rights (UTR), acolytes of the national American Federation of Teachers (AFT) bureaucracy, has also apparently prevented announced presidential candidate Nicole Conaway and two other members of her slate from appearing on the ballot. This and other undemocratic methods should be opposed by rank-and-file educators.

It is the case, however, that Conaway, a leader of the pseudo-left Equal Opportunity Now/By Any Means Necessary (EON/BAMN), offers educators no way forward either. The same is true for the Members United (MU) slate, led by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and MI CORE supporters. Both of these factions conduct themselves as a “loyal opposition” within the DFT apparatus and function either as part of the Democratic Party or in alliance with it.

The destruction of education in the former Motor City, once considered a national model of excellence, has been primarily executed by the Democratic Party. That is why a real fight can only be led by the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is organizing educators independently of and opposition to the union apparatus and both big business parties.

To take up this struggle, educators need to critically examine the record and program of every faction of the DFT apparatus.

United for Teachers Rights (UTR): What the record shows

DFT Vice President Lakia Wilson-Lumpkins is the UTR’s candidate for president and heads their slate. She is also a member of the 2022-2024 AFT Michigan Administrative Board and appears to be successfully climbing the apparatus career track.

The UTR-run DFT has ruthlessly imposed “school reform” (Obama’s Education Secretary Arne Duncan declared Detroit “ground zero” for privatization in 2009), merit pay, and endless budget cuts. The city, under decades of Democratic Party control, has largely dismantled its public schools, leaving half its children relegated to for-profit run charter businesses. The DFT, like the AFT, has provided unstinting support for

these politicians throughout.

In 2021, the DFT forced teachers into unsafe school buildings enabling widespread community transmission of SARS-CoV-2. The bureaucracy ignored the 91 percent vote of the Detroit membership for a safety strike, refused to uphold teachers’ rights to accommodations, and allowed the district to end the mask mandate in June 2022. The DFT bureaucracy has done zero to ensure that all buildings were retrofitted to combat the aerosolized virus.

While educators successfully compelled the DPSCD to extend the existence of a virtual school, the district sabotaged remote learning by underfunding and increasingly difficult restrictions. The union blocked teachers from any independent action. Educators died, children were sickened and many were stricken with Long COVID. School services continue to break down due to staff shortages.

The pandemic policies of the DFT under UTR leadership was a continuation, under more deadly circumstances, of its longstanding endorsement of every attack perpetrated on public education, including:

- **Extortion.** After the 2008 crash, the DFT forced individual teachers to “loan” the district (interest-free) up to \$10,000 each. The notorious provision was drafted by AFT President Randi Weingarten.

- **School closures and budget cuts.** The DFT collaborated with school privatization plans and draconian cuts imposed by a series of Emergency Managers (Robert Bobb 2009, Jack Martin 2013, Darnell Earley 2015). The EMs were instituted under Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm and all were members of the Democratic Party. The union allowed the shutdown of the award-winning Catherine Ferguson Academy (2014) and dozens of other schools, a process that continues with Superintendent Nikolai Vitti’s 2022 reorganization plan. The union also imposed merit pay.

- **Unsafe buildings.** The union signed onto a deal which dissolved the Detroit Public School district in order to pay off wealthy bondholders, creating a new district, Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), without the resources to fix buildings. In 2015 and 2016, teachers walked out in independent sickouts, defying the DFT and the Democratic politicians including then-president Barack Obama, to protest decrepit rodent-infested buildings, black mold and crumbling infrastructure.

Members United (MU): Fake socialists aiming for positions

While the UTR has directly partnered with the district in blocking educators from fighting for their rights, the erstwhile “opposition” of “Members United” has no fundamental differences. In fact, their program calls for tightening the AFT straitjacket on the membership.

The slate is headed by Gavin Buckley, a member of the Democratic

Socialists of America (DSA), and includes the Facebook group MI-CORE, modeled after the ruling faction in the Chicago Teachers Union. In his Facebook campaign statement, Buckley lists three slogans, none of which involve school safety, reversing privatization or improved wages and benefits. Instead, his platform is summed up by three words: “Transparent”—making “union information” “accessible to all members” and having “key decisions” shared with members. “Fighting”—“enforcing the contract” and taking control “of the narrative.” And “Organized”—“having a building rep in every building.”

Teachers can apparently look forward to reading the “union information” signed behind their backs and being given the bureaucracy’s self-serving “narrative” at the same time.

Buckley’s colleague, Dylan Wegela, a suburban Detroit teacher and DSA member, has just won election as a Democrat to the Michigan state House. In an interview in the DSA-aligned *Jacobin* magazine, he sums up his mission in absolutely conventional, bourgeois terms. “It’s going to be about putting pressure on elected officials from both parties to do what’s right by the people.” There is no hint of struggle and nothing remotely “socialist” involved.

Underscoring the DSA’s allegiance to the union apparatus, Wegela promotes the United Teachers Los Angeles as a model for Detroit educators. This should be understood as a threat, not a credential. The UTLA has kept teachers on the job for four months after their contract expiration, refusing to even call a strike vote. In 2019, the UTLA betrayed the powerful 9-day walkout in the city, educators’ demands for small class sizes, more staff, and an end to privatization. Wegela himself played a critical role in the abrupt shutdown of the 2018 Arizona teachers strike, fraudulently claiming the inadequate deal was the “most we could get.”

It is noteworthy that the DSA is backing Shawn Fain, a long-time union bureaucrat in the ongoing United Auto Workers election and opposing rank-and-file and socialist candidate Will Lehman. That is because the DSA is part of the Democratic Party and speaks for the upper-middle-class elements striving for careers in the anti-worker union apparatus.

EON/BAMN: Racism, demagoguery, and support for the Democrats

Equal Opportunity Now/By Any Means Necessary (EON/BAMN)’s candidates include the former president of the DFT, Steve Conn, for Executive Board. Although reinstated to her job after an illegal termination, BAMN member Nicole Conaway has been denied a spot on the ballot by the UTR leadership, which claims she has not kept up her dues.

This is aimed at intimidating all educators and should be opposed. In 2015, then-president Steve Conn was removed from office in a similarly undemocratic manner. But the attack on BAMN does not mean it is mounting a genuine and principled opposition to the UTR. On the contrary, the organization has long been a safety valve for the corporate and political establishment in Detroit, which seeks to politically disorient the working class with its toxic mix of racist politics and subordination to the trade union apparatus and Democratic Party.

While the BAMN candidates claim to oppose “illegal termination of hundreds of employees during the pandemic,” and call for smaller classes, they lay the blame for these conditions on DPSCD Superintendent Vitti individually. They say nothing about the role of the Democrats and say the chief problem confronting Detroit educators and students is “racism.”

This is particularly significant since the political establishment in Detroit has long been dominated by black Democratic Party politicians,

who have conducted a decades-long attack on workers on behalf of big business. The racializing of problems caused by capitalism conceals the class interests of the corporate and political elite, divides the working class and prevents class unity.

BAMN’s alliance with the UFT/DFT and black Democrats has a history. In 2009, they blocked with then-DFT president Keith Johnson to prevent a strike against cuts, shutdown of schools and the theft of money (“loans”) from teachers. In 2011, Nicole Conaway and Democratic City councilperson JoAnne Watson hailed the conversion of Catherine Ferguson academy to a for-profit chain as a “victory for the new Civil Rights movement.” This paved the way for its subsequent closure. In 2015, BAMN met with Emergency Manager Darnell Earley, sowing illusions in appeals to the black Democrat responsible, among others, for the poisoning of Flint. The list goes on.

Like the pseudo-left more generally, BAMN speaks for aggrieved sections of the upper middle class, including minority businessmen, union bureaucrats and lower-level politicians, who, far from opposing capitalism, want to get a “piece of the action.” It chains workers to the capitalist two-party system, blocks its class unity across all racial/ethnic/linguistic lines, aligns with the ruling class in war against Russia and China, and sows pessimism and defeatism by confining workers within the right-wing trade union apparatus.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) take the opposite approach. We fight to unify workers of all races and nationalities in opposition to the two corporate-controlled parties and the capitalist system they defend.

The SEP and IWA-RFC are supporting Will Lehman, the Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president, and his call for the building of rank-and-file committees in every factory to transfer power from the corrupt UAW apparatus to workers on the shop floor.

The Michigan Rank-and-File Educators Safety Committee (MRFESC) was established in December 2020 with the support of the SEP to provide a genuine voice to teachers, support staff, parents and students in Detroit and across the state. As part of the IWA-RFC, the Michigan committee advances a program based on what educators, parents and students need—not what the politicians say is affordable. It is fighting to unite educators, autoworkers and every section of the working class, in the US and internationally, to end the sacrifice of public health to corporate profit and carry out a massive redistribution of wealth to guarantee a high-quality and safe education for all youth.

There can be no solution to the crises in education within a system that concentrates all of society’s wealth and political power in the hands of the super-rich. We urge all educators to join this struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact