Anger at layoffs and budget cuts dominates Detroit School Board meeting

J. Cooper
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As the final decision looms on Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) budget cuts, dozens of educators, parents, nurses, mental health workers, counselors and many more vented their anger at the monthly school board meeting on May 16. At least 150 jobs are on the chopping block, with those in eliminated positions told they can work for less at other jobs, or go back to college to qualify for the work they have already been performing.

Educators repeatedly denounced what amounts to the "Sophie's Choice" being demanded by DPSCD Superintendent Nikolai Vitti, stating they did not want to see their salaries or jobs "saved" at the cost of others. This was in stark contrast to the position of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) which hailed the decision to retain attendance officers (DFT members) while the jobs of paraprofessionals and others (non-DFT members) were cut.

The anger of the parents and educators was palpable, while pseudo-left supporters of the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party—BAMN (By Any Means Necessary), the DSA (Democrats Socialists of America) and others—aligned themselves with the union apparatus, often beginning their contributions with the words, "As a proud DFT member …"

A small protest took place prior to the meeting organized by BAMN members together with leaders of the DFT, a clear indication of its toothless character. The DFT's website shows a picture of the protest and says—in the most polite and cringing language—"We are urging the school board to meet with labor and community leaders before the final 2023-2024 budget approval."

With the DFT and all district contracts expiring on June 30, the unions have opposed any real fight to defend jobs or win inflation-busting wages. In fact, at the last DFT meeting, President Lakia Wilson-Lumpkins denounced teachers and insisted they should go beg the school board.

At the raucous board meeting, the only mention of the broader political issues at stake and a genuine program to fight was made by the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (MERFSC). MERFSC members also were the only ones to bring attention to the tragic death of six-year-old Jimari Williams—a student at Marcus Garvey Academy who died on April 26 after he and other students were sickened in what's being called a cluster of "flu-like illnesses." The committee called for the mobilization of workers, parents and students to fight layoffs and budget cuts, and urged educators and others to attend a public meeting on Saturday, May 20 to organize the fight.

The passionate remarks of Linda Gardner, a paraprofessional, were characteristic of many of those who spoke in the meeting. "You can count on maybe two hands how many times I've taken off. You can count how many times I've stayed after school, to stay with kids who can't get picked up. You can talk about how many times parents have called me over the weekend because they needed a ride to go to the doctor, those things that you want to cut.

"You want to cut our jobs. You want to say that we don't matter. Well, you can look at my phone, I [can] get 40 to 50 texts or calls a day from a teacher because she's having disciplinary problems in her class. Or she needs me to come monitor her class so she can teach. I'm at my school from 7:45 [a.m.] to sometimes six at night and I've got kids of my own."

She emphasized, "I [don't want to] take anybody's money away from them. But we have kids and families that we have to provide for, too. Did you ever think about that?"

Daniela Borum opposed the cuts to College Transition Advisor positions, saying, "I'm exhausted. I don't have anything else to talk about. I'm ready to talk about what we can do to ensure that our students still have access to support."

Kay Thomas, a music teacher from Bates Academy whose position is being terminated, spoke determinedly about her fight for her rights as a high seniority teacher of 22 years. She explained how she was victimized for using Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) to care for her disabled son. "I have seniority. You are not supposed to use my absences against me. You are not supposed to change my work assignment. You are not supposed to get rid of me."

Kira Joyner, a first year Academic Interventionist, a skilled position requiring a bachelor's degree, that is not being eliminated, illustrated how cuts to the support staff affect her job. "I've encountered a situation where I was being demanded to sub and I said 'No, I don't think that's right.' And I found out, of course, that it was not. I had retaliation because of that. I used to have a planning period that was taken away, and I was told that planning periods were a luxury. The quality of education I can provide my students is diminished."

"I stand in solidarity with my brothers and sisters and my siblings who are in danger of being laid off," declared Donna Rowell Davis, a licensed professional nurse with 26 years in Detroit schools. "My other concern is for the other ancillary staff, mainly the nurses, district nurses, and the fact that we have more agency nurses than we do district nurses working in the Detroit Public School system.

"You're supposed to have a baccalaureate degree from a four-year university in order to be hired with the Detroit Public School system," she continued, insisting that the district should hire full-time registered nurses as the agency nurses who have staffed the schools during the COVID-19 emergency are being discontinued. "You have LPNs who are practicing nursing in these schools by themselves." Referencing the wide-ranging cuts, she added, "We do not have enough social

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workers or other psychologists to do the testing and social workers to provide services to our students and to our staff."

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Shay Dockery described the increased challenges for mental health workers, "After the pandemic we have definitely seen an increase in mental health issues, with getting back into society. [My job is] getting the students more stable. Many of the hits that hit during the pandemic were also at home, with a lot of moving, the parents losing their jobs and losing some type of funding of income."

Shay explained how the pandemic affected many of the students she works with: "The students faced a lot of trauma during that period that got them to not wanting to be at school at all. It got them to be thinking more about working than schooling, so now we're kind of rejuvenating their ability to even want to be in school and want to gain education. We are seeing this definitely in high school and we are even seeing some middle schoolers going out and doing little odd jobs and staying in virtual schooling, or saying they are in virtual schooling and they're actually at work.

"So just getting them back to being mentally stable, getting them to understand that, just be a child and go through your learning experience and not worry about the traumas that's going on, so we're kind of bringing some more stability for that."

A number of participants addressed the board's claim that "there is no money." Tori Anderson Lloyd, identifying herself as a DFT member, listed all the student recognition that began the board meeting. "I couldn't help wondering how many people making six figures are in direct close proximity with those students. None. The district continues to reiterate this rhetoric that student achievement is the most priority, and yet, we are willing to cut the people responsible for student achievement. Yes, teachers deserve a raise. We all deserve raises. However, our raises should not come at the expense of cutting our support, our teammates, our colleagues.

"And I know what the board is going to say. 'We don't have the money.' I've sat and listened to you all tell us that we don't have the money since I returned to the district in 2018. And yet Dr. Vitti has over 24 members of his cabinet making over six figures. I want to tell you: Make it enough."

Far from challenging the austerity measures being demanded by the Democratic-controlled state and local government, the union officials present at the meeting begged board members to work with the unions to prevent an explosion of opposition. Donna Jackson, president of the Detroit Federation of Paraprofessionals, entreated the school board, "We just ask you to reconsider," and reassured them that the union leadership is "always trying to be fair."

BAMN members addressed the board in the most narrow and parochial manner, punctuated with faux militancy and demagoguery. They focused on the simplistic non-solution of "Vitti out" or pointing to Vitti's salary as the place to start. When speaking of victimized educator Kay Thomas, they cited it as a unique case, not part of mass layoffs taking place in education nationally and internationally, as well as across industries.

Demonstrating their function as a faction of the union bureaucracy, BAMN spokesperson Nicole Conaway said, "Right now, Oakland educators are striking and providing us an example of fighting not only for well-deserved pay increases, but for more services for students." This was hours after the union bureaucracy shut down the picket lines in Oakland, California, and released a tentative agreement betraying everything the teachers had fought for during their strike.

The contributions of MERFSC members were greeted with applause, as they addressed the policies needed to mobilize the working class in defense of public health and public education, independent of the pro-capitalist unions and the two parties of big business.

Zac Corrigan spoke of the death of kindergartner Jimari Williams and the continuing toll of COVID-19 among children. "If Jimari didn't die directly from COVID, he had probably already been infected at least once and been weakened by it," he said. Calling for the closure of Marcus Garvey Academy until a "full investigation has been carried out by teachers, parents and trusted scientists," Corrigan ended his remarks outlining the broader demands of the MERFSC. "We demand every school and workplace be provided with high quality ventilation using HEPA filters, Far-UV devices and other scientific technologies that can reduce risk. There are plenty of resources in society to make all of this and more a reality but only if teachers take matters into their own hands."

Phyllis, an elementary school teacher in Detroit and supporter of the MERFSC, added, "The planned layoffs of nurses, para-pros and others from DPSCD is an attack on workers' livelihoods and an attack on students' right to high quality public education as well as an attack on public health and safety. We unequivocally oppose these cuts and call for the broadest mobilization teachers, workers, students and parents to fight against them, including with strikes and other work actions.

"The Democratic Socialists of America and BAMN are demanding that Vitti simply be removed, as though his replacement would lead to any different outcome. The layoffs and the cuts have generated huge opposition from teachers and other workers. But the union is not making any effort to wage a real fight for what we need. In fact, at our union meeting, we were told to come beg for mercy at the school board meeting, which is a bit like asking the devil for a glass of water."

Phyllis was the only educator during the hours-long meeting to address the global crisis facing workers, stressing, "Public education and public health are under attack all across the country, and internationally as well. It's a global crisis of capitalism and it's much bigger than Detroit."

She concluded by emphasizing the decisive work of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees uniting educators, Amazon workers, autoworkers, rail and health care workers across the globe, and urged those in attendance to participate in the emergency meeting of the MERFSC this Saturday.

Register here for the online MERFSC meeting this Saturday at 1 p.m. EDT.

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