“I am fighting for my students and my program”: Outspoken educator targeted as Detroit school officials prepare mass layoffs

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30 May 2023

To join the fight to defend public education and oppose the cuts in Detroit and across the US, contact the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee at educators@wsws.org, or fill out the form at the end of this article.

Mass layoffs and major cuts to programs loom over the largest school district in Michigan. In just two weeks, on June 13, the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) is scheduled to adopt a 2023-2024 annual budget that is $189 million less than last year.

Over a hundred jobs will be eliminated outright, according to Superintendent Nikolai Vitti, including paraeducators (teaching assistants), school culture facilitators, college transition advisers and even contract nurses. Some 200 other workers will be forced to take on new roles—if they are lucky—in order to keep their jobs.

Behind the backs of rank-and-file educators, DPSCD administrators are presently jockeying over the final details of the cuts. In some cases, individual school principals will have the final say in precisely what jobs and programs will stay and which ones will go.

Administrators have now begun notifying those who have been targeted for transfer or termination. Kay Thomas, the veteran music teacher at Bates Academy, is one of them.

A popular teacher with 22 years in the district, whose students have frequently gone on to win competitions, Kay is known for bringing in artists from the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and other venues into her classroom to help train the students.

“I had an observation on April 5, and on April 11, I had a post-observation conference with the assistant principal in which she rated my teaching ‘highly effective,’” Kay told the WSWS.

“My students were able to go to competitions at the MSBOA (Michigan School Band and Orchestra Association) and although they had only started practicing their instruments three months before, won first and second place.

“I work with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO), and the Detroit Jazz Festival. Residency performers come in to help train the students. We also have a program with Michigan State University’s Community Music School, where students receive private lessons. They send an artist to assist the students to learn how to play jazz. Then there is a showcase of what they have been taught. We were the only orchestra performing at the Cliff Bell’s, a jazz club established in 1935 where many famous musicians have played.

“Ms. Marion Hayden, a world renowned Jazz double bassist, came in regularly and our school is the only one that produces double bass students because of this relationship. Renaissance, Cass Tech and the Detroit School of Arts get my students every year. I have a student at Harvard who wrote a letter to the district to support me.”

DPSCD officials even produced a promotional video about the Bates Academy with the principal praising Ms. Thomas’ music program.

But this didn’t stop her from being targeted. On April 12, the day after being rated “highly effective,” she explained, “the principal and the assistant principal called me into the office to say they had to let go of four positions and I was one of them.” Kay was told she would be transferred to another school at the principal’s request, but has not yet been told which school.

Kay believes administrators are targeting her because she has recently taken time off under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) to care for her wheelchair-bound special needs 10-year-old son.

When she asked why she was being transferred, “I was told it was because I was absent a lot and they cannot get subs, and I am therefore ‘ineffective,’” Kay said. “I explained that they cannot hold my FMLA against me.”

Kay is a dues-paying member of the Detroit Federation of Teachers union (DFT). But when she spoke out to rally support for her music program and defend her job, DFT leaders stepped in on the side of the administration to silence her.

“[DFT president] Lakia [Wilson-Lumpkin] called me on April 27 and told me that she was getting calls that I was upsetting the staff and the students,” Kay explained, “and she said she was issuing me a courtesy verbal warning to stop telling the students that they were getting rid of me, or the

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principal will write me up. It's inappropriate for her to call me about that!"

Kay also filed a grievance with the DFT, which she says union reps have ignored.

"The school administration is sabotaging the instrumental music program year after year. Parents have the right to know what is happening. They are getting rid of me and closing the music program at the end of the year. Vitti made the staff cuts public on April 22, so why am I being silenced for defending my job? Why are they denying me my First Amendment rights?"

The victimization of Kay Thomas by school administrators with the direct assistance of union leadership gives a preview of what educators across the district face as this school year comes to an end: massive job cuts, and a "union" that takes the side of administration against rank-and-file educators.

If a highly rated music teacher struggling to care for an ill child at home can be victimized with the collusion of her union, no job is safe!

In opposition to the treachery of the DFT bureaucracy, educators must uphold the principle "An injury to one is an injury to all," and oppose the victimization of Thomas and the elimination of the music program. This must be combined with a fight against all layoffs and budget cuts and the demand for a massive increase in funding for public education.

Contracts for over 3,000 Detroit educators expire on June 30, just weeks after the budget deal is scheduled to go through. The DFT bureaucracy—which negotiated the contract that ends during summer when teachers have no leverage—is opposed to any fight. That is why rank-and-file educators must take the conduct of this struggle in their own hands.

Kay and other educators attended an emergency meeting on May 20, organized by the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (MERFSC) to rally opposition to the looming layoffs and to fight for safe schools in the wake of the death of Marcus Garvey Academy kindergartener Jimari Williams.

"I am not just fighting for my position," Kay told the meeting. "I am fighting for my students and my program. You can't just take music away."

The MERFSC is totally independent of the union apparatus and fights for a rank-and-file rebellion of educators against the combined attacks of the school board and the union bureaucracy. The meeting emphasized the need to link up Detroit teachers with autoworkers, who like teachers also face mass layoffs and a corrupt union apparatus. The United Auto Workers contracts at the Big Three autoworkers in Detroit and across the country expire in September.

The MERFSC is part of the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), a new and growing network of committees that link up workers across all industries and countries, controlled by workers on the shop floor and teachers in the classroom.

The job and program cuts in the Detroit schools correspond with the ending of federal "COVID-19 relief" funds allocated through the American Rescue Plan Act. As such, they are part of an escalating nationwide wave of school budget cuts.

In New York City Public Schools, the largest district in the US, hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts were implemented at the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year, and Democratic Mayor Eric Adams has called for nearly $1 billion in additional cuts. In Sweetwater Public Schools in the San Diego area, at least 214 teachers on temporary contracts will be let go at the end of the year. Like Detroit, each of these districts are in cities and states run by both Democratic Party mayors and governors who are implementing austerity measures even as the Biden administration finds trillions for bank bailouts and war.

Among rank-and-file educators and parents, there is enormous opposition to the attack on public education everywhere. In Grosse Pointe Public Schools, near Detroit, where $5 million in cuts are planned for next school year, there was a nine-hour long school board meeting on May 22, with four hours of public comment from parents and others opposing the cuts.

The defense of public education requires a massive expansion of funding. Billions should be spent to hire educators by the thousands, in addition to counselors, mental health professionals, school nurses and paraeducators of all kinds. All educators and school workers should be given substantial raises to meet the soaring cost of inflation. Academic programs should be expanded and improved. Schools should be modernized with appropriate ventilation, HEPA filters and other scientific protections against the spread of diseases like COVID-19 and H. influenza.

To fight for this, contact the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee at educators@wsws.org, or fill out the form below.

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