

No to layoffs! No to budget cuts! Build rank-and-file committees to defend public education in Detroit!

Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
9 June 2023

Register now to attend the next online meeting of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee on Saturday, June 24, at 1:00 p.m. EDT to discuss a fighting program to “Unite the working class against the layoffs and budget cuts in education.”

This statement was distributed to teachers at the final meeting of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) in advance of the contract expiration June 30 for all district school workers. Next week, the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) will announce its 2024 budget. It has already begun laying off paraprofessionals, eliminating College Transition Advisors, Academic Deans, contracted nurses and other essential staff. Numerous programs, including the award-winning summer enrichments, are being terminated.

The complete capitulation of the DFT to the cuts and its disconnect from rank-and-file teachers was on full display at the June 8 meeting. Teachers demanded to know what the union was asking for in negotiations. During the months of “talks,” teachers have been deliberately kept in the dark and union President Lakia Wilson-Lumpkins still had no intention of replying. She bullied those educators waiting in line to speak and said she would not provide the information, claiming it was “out of respect for the process.”

*As teachers pressed for contract demands, the DFT president descended from stonewalling to threats and curses. “We don’t want to rob the bank and then in the fall we are looking at layoffs—real layoffs.” Lumpkins made it clear that teachers should not expect the union to fight. “Don’t get mad about it in this meeting, take the smoke to the school board meeting. You need to impress upon Nikolai Vitti and the school board members that all act like you’re not there sometimes. That’s where the pockets are ... show your a** up.”*

Lumpkins then flatly opposed the age-old labor principle of “No contract, No work.” She ruled out a strike, no matter what the extent of district demands. Indicating simultaneously her contempt for workers whose livelihoods are threatened and her determination to prevent a work stoppage, she insisted teachers strikes in Michigan are illegal, claiming “I’d be the one who goes to jail.”

Such an organization is a “union” in name only; in reality, it is a well-paid apparatus working to suppress the rank-and-file and force through even more austerity. The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee urges educators to draw the balance sheet of the DFT’s years of betrayal at the hands of the DFT and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

The road forward lies in independent struggle by educators to abolish the bureaucracy, and for rank-and-file control to defeat the bipartisan assault on education, jobs and living standards. We invite

all educators, parents and students to join the committee.

The Democratic Party-controlled Detroit Public Schools Community District is carrying out brutal budget cuts at a time when workers and young people are already reeling from growing social inequality and precarious living conditions.

Similar cuts are taking place across the US, including in New York City, which faces nearly \$1 billion in cuts to schools, and in Oakland, California, which is facing multiple school closures. The recent debt ceiling bill worked out between President Joe Biden and Republican House Speaker Kevin McCarthy ensures that these cuts will be just the beginning, as another \$1.5 trillion will be cut from education and other social programs over the next decade. It exposes, once again, how the two parties of big business create a charade of “crisis” for the purpose of forcing the working class to accept austerity.

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee rejects DPSCD Superintendent Nikolai Vitti’s claim that there is “no money.” At the online informational meeting this week, Vitti—like Pontius Pilate—washed his hands of responsibility, stating, “It’s out of our control, we only have so much money.”

This is a lie. There is plenty of money. It’s just that under capitalism the working class gets no say about where it goes. Did anyone ask workers if they preferred an escalating war in Ukraine, which threatens a nuclear exchange, or billions to be invested in education, public health and upgraded infrastructure?

The Biden administration has enacted a budget allocating nearly \$1 trillion for the military to prosecute war against Russia in Ukraine and future wars. For decades, Democrats and Republicans at the state level have poured more than \$1 trillion into the coffers of the Big Three as “business incentives” and hundreds of millions more into the hands of billionaire real estate tycoons—all while starving public schools.

In addition to the claim that there is “no money,” Vitti and the big business establishment are concealing the impact of their budget measures. They now say, “There are no layoffs,” but over **100 positions have been eliminated**. The sleight of hand is accomplished by failing to count those who lost their jobs but agreed to a severance package. Nor do they count those pushed down into lower-paying jobs or the termination of contracted personnel.

The DPSCD has been far from “transparent” with educators, students and families as to the impact of the cuts. Nevertheless, the loss of vital programs and services are already being felt. Despite the death of a Marcus Garvey Academy kindergartner in an outbreak of H. influenzae, record RSV hospitalizations past winter, the continued spread of COVID-19, and the persistence of Long COVID among

students, **contracted school nurses are being eliminated.**

The award-winning **Summer Learning Experience** for Detroit children has been abruptly ended this summer, denying children enrichment programs, athletic programs including intramurals, skill-based coaching programs and neighborhood-based programs, in addition to academic support.

The outstanding **music program at Bates Academy**, known for its collaborations with Cliff Bell and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, is on the chopping block. The outspoken veteran educator who built the program, Kay Thomas, is being transferred out. How many more programs and services are being cut? Parents, students and educators are being kept in the dark.

Vitti wraps his deception in another lie: the claim that the problem is racism and the issue is “equitable” funding in the state. This age-old divide-and-conquer tactic aims to pit workers and young people against each other over rapidly dwindling resources. The real culprits are the tiny number of extremely wealthy oligarchs who actually run society and their two political parties—the Democrats and Republicans. The ruling elites are using the budget crisis to fundamentally restructure public education along class lines.

The role of the teachers’ unions—from the AFT and NEA hierarchy on down—has been to sabotage strikes, impose concessions and enforce austerity. This is well under way as current contracts expire. The Detroit Federation of Teachers, the Detroit Federation of Para-Professionals, AFSCME, the Detroit Association of Educational Office Employees and the International Union of Operating Engineers have refused to mobilize the powerful Detroit working class against the budget cuts and layoffs. They collectively pretend to be powerless and limit their public efforts to encouraging educators to “wear red,” while conspiring to impose Vitti’s budget, including below-inflation pay raises, on educators during the summer.

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has a completely different orientation. We unite educators, parents, students and workers across all districts and job categories to fight for what is really necessary, not what the rich say they will “budget.” We are part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which unites teachers in Detroit with their working class brothers and sisters across the US and around the world, who all face similar attacks.

The allies of the union bureaucracy, like the fake “left” Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and Equality Opportunity Now/By Any Means Necessary (EON/BAMN), seek to divert the anger of workers and youth back into the dead-end task of “revitalizing” the unions and pleading with the Democrats. They openly solidarize themselves with Vitti’s claims that the main reason for the cuts is racial inequity, denying the fact that capitalist governments across the globe are universally slashing education and impoverishing educators while funding war.

BAMN’s inane calls for “Vitti out” provide no way forward for workers to fight; Vitti is just one in an endless line of highly-paid government bean-counters imposing cuts. We don’t need a “good” superintendent, but the end of the subordination of education and society to the profit needs of the capitalist elite.

The IWA-RFC aims to abolish this union apparatus, return power to rank-and-file educators and mobilize independently of the two capitalist political parties. The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee demands:

• **No confidence in the DFT/AFT bureaucracy!** All negotiations must be monitored by trusted rank-and-file workers and live-streamed

publicly.

• **An immediate 50 percent raise for all educators and school workers!** Educators have never been made whole from decades of concessions. The Detroit Academy of Arts and Sciences will pay teachers \$100,000 next school year. If the businesses behind these for-profit operations can pay this, we must demand that all educators have the necessary resources to live.

• **Increase staffing!** Learning loss is real, and schools must address this with robust learning support at every level. Class sizes must be brought down to no more than 20. Instead of layoffs, every school needs mental health professionals, a licensed registered nurse, and full access to support systems for every student.

• **Expand funding!** Every family must be provided the tools needed for a modern education: computers, Internet and options for high quality virtual learning. Every school needs a library with a credentialed librarian, music—both vocal and instrumental—art, science, field trips and more. This is the 21st century. We need to expand culture, not attack it.

• **A restored and expanded summer enrichment program for all youth!** Without specifying the draconian cuts already implemented, the DPSCD website tersely announces, “The district will not offer summer learning enrichment.” This is a huge blow to Detroit youth. For two years, the Detroit Summer Learning Experiences offered an award-winning range of classes and athletics.

• **Modernize the schools!** In order to combat the ongoing pandemic and associated diseases, including RSV and Hib, modern HEPA air filtration and far UV technology must be deployed to minimize the spread of infectious diseases and protect public health. The death of kindergartner Jimari Williams from Hib is a terrible warning: Schools must be—and can be—made safe from all these airborne diseases.



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