

"Unite the teachers and the auto workers, let's build these rank-and-file committees and go forth!"

Michigan and Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Committees discuss strategy to defend jobs and stop budget cuts

Nancy Hanover
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On Saturday, June 24, the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee joined with the Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Committee to discuss the way forward to fight what is shaping up to be a tsunami of budget cuts and layoffs in public education across the US.

The discussion marked a new step forward in the struggle to unite school workers with autoworkers, transit workers and the entire working class. The event followed a lively campaign by Detroit educators at a local auto plant making clear the commonality of their struggles—a theme that dominated Saturday's meeting.

Zac Corrigan, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party and member of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, outlined the political issues involved in the bipartisan attack on public education. "The new US budget deal will mean a cut in billions of real dollars to already cash-strapped school districts," he emphasized. "These cuts are also the result of the end of federal COVID funding, despite the fact that the pandemic continues."

He pointed to the devastating and ongoing impact of the pandemic, which has killed at a minimum 2,200 children and 8,000 educators in the US, while at least 96 percent of schoolchildren are estimated to have been infected. He said that the scale of the health impact on the future generation is still unknown, "nevertheless, Biden has ended the Public Health Emergency and ended COVID support to schools." In Detroit, this has resulted in the layoffs of many school nurses, paraprofessionals and other critical support staff.

Corrigan noted, "This destruction of public education through a million cuts takes place while both Democrats and Republicans join together to spend trillions on war and bank bailouts. Biden has enacted a record \$1 trillion military budget."

Corrigan denounced the American Federation of Teachers' (AFT) recent endorsement of Biden, following that of the National Educators Association (NEA). What another round of Democrats really means, he said, is previewed in New York City, run by Democratic Mayor Eric Adams, where close to \$1 billion in cuts to schools are looming.

Corrigan also detailed the plans for massive austerity in the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), which is also controlled by the Democratic Party. These include \$300 million in cuts, the elimination of hundreds of education positions and the ending of critical programs including award-winning summer enrichment camps. The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) has not only refused to mobilize educators against the cuts—despite a June 30 contract termination—but refused to tell

the membership their negotiation position.

Of enormous significance for the fight of educators, Corrigan said, the contracts for all "Big Three" autoworkers expires on September 14. Just like teachers, autoworkers have faced years of below-inflation wage increases, concessionary contracts and punishing schedules—all implemented through the collaboration of the United Auto Workers (UAW).

After the opening report, school workers, parents and other workers eagerly participated in the discussion. While many echoed the call to unite workers across industries, they also raised concerns that workers' fears might paralyze them. Socialist Equality Party members emphasized the role of leadership, the need to examine and understand the history of the unions' treachery, and the need for a program based on a socialist perspective.

DPSCD parent Aliyah stated, "As a parent, it is quite frustrating. You are tired of being 'sick and tired.' But the voices are slightly muted. I talk to teachers quite often, they are not pleased about conditions or the uncertainty about positions that will ultimately be gone."

She concluded, "Combining everybody is definitely the way to go. I think combining workers will release some of that fear." Endorsing the efforts of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to unite the working class across job descriptions and geography, Aliyah said, "You might not get 100 percent, but as many as possible. As a parent, I would support a strike [against the cuts]. I appreciate you doing this. I am trying to commit to being even more active. They [the educators] are looking for a leader to direct them to act or to strike."

Ronda, a grandparent, said, "I want to speak on behalf of Detroit. They are trying to cut summer school and special programs for the kids. Some of these programs are enjoyed by a lot of kids, like my granddaughter. She so enjoys art and she's good at it. Now that we are losing our teachers, with their contract turned upside down, there's nowhere for the kids to go. When do teachers find out they lost their job? In a minute, the schools won't be open because we will have no teachers."

Kay Thomas, a beloved music education teacher at DPSCD's Bates Academy who has been removed from her position as a result of the district-wide budget cuts, explained that the school administration is "using my FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act] against me. They cancelled 18 of my concerts and used it against me on my professional development evaluation."

Thomas reported that other teachers have also accused DPSCD of targeting them for using their legal rights to FLMA. She said, “I was told that [Superintendent] Vitti wants to put all teachers using FMLAs in one building and use us like substitutes. I have a masters plus, with two-and-half degrees, you are not going to use me as a substitute. That’s unfair. You are penalizing me for being on FMLA that you and the government approved.”

Speaking about the campaign at Warren Truck, in which she participated, Thomas commented, “I think most autoworkers were reluctant to take leaflets. The way these jobs are, you have fear about stepping outside the line. But the ones who took it and listened to us, they were open. One lady said, ‘Give me all of these’ and said she’d pass them out. She wasn’t afraid. We need to be more open.

“The people who are out here supporting us, they are really trying to help and some don’t yet understand that.” Thomas explained how she warned the workers that soon they would face seven-day weeks and 12-hour days, concluding, “Maybe they’ll remember, and say, hey let’s join the ranks.” She concluded, “I think we should unite. We are all fighting for the same cause.”

Phyllis, a DPSCD teacher, emphasized the importance of the Educators Rank-and-File Committee in sharing information. She reported that Detroit teachers have been completely left in the dark as to the current negotiations. “This decision-making,” she emphasized, “has to be transferred to the educators themselves.” She continued, “I do not find my co-workers complacent, but they have been betrayed. They are waiting to see what we will do. It is important that we explain the role of the unions, the Democrats and provide a clear orientation to fight.”

Zac showed the meeting participants how to join the committee, emphasizing that the central issue confronting all workers was the need for new leadership, independent of the capitalist political parties or ties to the profit system. He featured statements of Rank-and-File Committees in different industries across Germany, Australia, Canada and other countries, noting, “We are preparing for the big struggles facing all of us. It’s one crisis.”

Dan De Vries, a representative of the Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Committee, reported on the attacks on New York City schools and drew the parallels among teachers everywhere. He stated, “A tentative contract is now up for vote by 115,000 teachers and support staff in New York. If this current tentative five-year contract passes, it means teachers will be worse off than before the contract.” He explained that with rents and overall inflation up 8 percent, teachers would be taking a 3 to 4 percent pay cut.

“After everything that teachers have been through over the past few years, a contract that lowers the standard of living is just a slap in the face. For many support staff, at the end of the contract, some will make only \$34,000 a year,” he said.

De Vries indicted the treacherous role of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) for both this regressive contract and the union’s refusal to fight the city’s draconian cuts to public education which now total nearly \$1 billion. He pointed to similar issues confronting New York City transit workers and school bus drivers, as well as UPS and autoworkers—all of whom are gearing up for critical contract struggles.

De Vries’ comments prompted a New York City bus driver, Jose, to inform the group via chat of the situation facing drivers. He wrote:

We are currently in negotiations for a new contract. We do not trust our union representatives. Since 2014, they have given away approximately 90 percent of our benefits, creating a split within our membership. Now, they recently took a strike vote because the owners only offered a two percent raise. How do we support a union that gives us a two percent raise and gives themselves 10

percent? We have been fighting physical, verbal, and mental abuse for years. Our representative refuses to process our grievances...

How do we trust a union who is just out to enrich themselves? We filed with the NYSDOL [New York State Department of Labor] and nothing happens. We are tired. We need a change. [During] our last strike in February 2013 for our Employee Protection Provision, we froze on the picket line, and the Union returned us to work empty-handed. It seems like all we do is lose.”

In reply, DPSCD teacher Khara pointed out that the “unions, which are supposedly workers’ organizations, actually have an interest in atomizing or splitting apart the working class.”

She explained that the unions will not defend workers because they support the capitalist profit system, referring to teachers’ experiences during the sickouts in 2015 which was suppressed by AFT President Randi Weingarten and the Democratic Party. “We need to fight for fully-funded equal education across-the-board, with more schools and trillions in funding—not war and endless dollars to killing in Ukraine.”

Khara denounced the role of both capitalist political parties, and urged workers to reject the unions’ support for Biden. “He ran on ‘following the science,’ and look what happened. We need to fight independently, for a socialist program, to establish our rights.”

Will Lehman, a worker at Mack Trucks and a leader of the IWA-RFC who ran for president of the United Auto Workers last year, told the group, “I saw your intervention at Warren Truck and really appreciated that. That type of cross-sector work is extremely important. After we established a rank-and-file committee at my plant in Macungie, Pennsylvania, my first intervention was at the picket line of teachers in Scranton, back in 2021. What’s clear is that autoworkers everywhere want to fight. It is not just a question of organization, but political perspective. We do need to unite cross sectors.”

Addressing the problems of fears and illegality brought up in the discussion, Lehman pointed that “the union bureaucrats *used to be* known for saying, ‘There’s no such thing as an illegal strike, just an unsuccessful one.’ Well, they don’t talk that way anymore. We need to know that history. The fact is there’s nothing they can do when we all stand up together.”

Lehman added, “If you are on the fence about joining the rank-and-file committee, we are not advocating individual actions that could get you fired. We are building for a mass movement of the working class. We must bring about this organization of workers that can’t be stopped. The main reason I attended today is to bring your message back to autoworkers. I am very sympathetic to your struggle, what you’ve been through during the pandemic, under-staffing and your struggle against the slashing of the arts.”

Speaking last in the discussion was Lisa, a nurse in New York City. She commented, “I work in a city hospital and I wanted to say that the fight of the working class goes throughout all these industries. The sellouts of the unions are also the same. In New York, doctors are being proletarianized because huge corporations pit doctors against each other in public versus private hospitals. The unions did the same things with nurses when they stood up to fight. We’re given a massive amount of work and 3 or 4 percent wage increases.

“If we pay close attention to the *World Socialist Web Site*, we see how this struggle is developing not only here in the US but around the world. The building of rank-and-file committees can be done by talking to people in our industries, making them aware of what’s happening, our program and our plan. By connecting, this is how we reach people. In auto, they call it ‘informational pickets.’

“We don’t need these unions. The rank and file only gets stomped on, over and over again. Why? They [the unions] have no interest in fighting.

The importance and gravity of the unity of the working class is apparent in light of the crisis of capitalism internationally and the drive to war. I unite with the teachers, the auto workers, let's build these rank-and-file committees and go forth!"



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