

Stop the cuts to public education in Detroit! Prepare strike action to defend jobs and win inflation-busting wage gains! Billions for schools, not war!

Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
2 July 2023

On June 30, contracts expired for thousands of teachers and other workers in the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) with the unions refusing to lift a finger to oppose \$300 million in budget reductions and job cuts. There has not been so much as a strike authorization vote—a clear sign the unions have quietly accepted all of the school board’s attacks.

Can anyone doubt the union intends to use the summer to impose a sellout deal that leaves educators unprotected from the ravages of inflation?

The cuts, adopted by the school board on June 13, will mean the elimination of hundreds of critical positions within the district, including paraprofessionals, contract nurses, academic deans and others. The award-winning summer enrichment program has already been terminated. The cuts will mean overcrowded classrooms and continued learning loss. The vital social and health supports that children need will be unavailable.

After decades of attacks on public education, accelerated during three-and-a-half years of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, school workers are looking for a way to fight back. The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, in recent campaigns and online meetings, has brought together teachers, parents, students and school bus drivers, as well as autoworkers and healthcare workers, to share our experiences and discuss how to unite and carry forward our struggles.

The pro-capitalist bureaucrats who run the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), however, are busy conspiring with administrators and local and state Democrats against the rank-and-file. DFT President Lakia Wilson-Lumpkins weeks ago ruled out a strike, leaning on the reactionary anti-strike laws in Michigan as an excuse and complaining that she, “would be the one to go to jail.”

The DFT president blamed educators themselves for the crisis, demanding they show up to plead with school board members. She has arrogantly refused to tell dues-paying members what the bargaining team is asking for, following

years of union-imposed wage and benefit regressions. Cynically, Wilson-Lumpkins termed the DPSCD decision to preserve the jobs of attendance agents (DFT members) at the expense of paraprofessionals (in the separate Detroit Association of Para-Professionals union) a “victory.”

We, the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, reject the endless calls for sacrifice from this highly-paid bureaucracy, which is entirely insulated from our day-to-day concerns. We demand:

- **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 this for-profit operation can pay this amount, 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 access and options for high quality virtual learning. Every school needs a library with a credentialed librarian, instruction in music—both vocal and instrumental—art, science, field trips and more. This is the 21st century. We need to expand culture, not attack it.

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A restored and expanded summer enrichment program for all youth!

• **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 safely deployed to minimize the spread of infectious diseases and protect public health. The death of DPSCD kindergartner Jimari Williams from the bacterial illness Hib is a terrible warning: Schools must be—and can be—made safe from all these airborne diseases.

We call for strike action in the fall, coordinated with the upsurge of teachers and the working class internationally, unless these demands are fully met. A strike of Detroit educators in September would be particularly powerful if linked with Detroit Three autoworkers, whose national contract expires September 14.

To carry forward such a fight, Detroit's thousands of rank-and-file educators must wrest control of their struggle from the grip of the pro-capitalist DFT apparatus, which has undemocratically blocked them from having any input into the bargaining process. Educators should develop a network of rank-and-file committees, based in every school and district and controlled by the educators themselves, to transfer decision-making and power from the union apparatus to the school workers in the buildings, classrooms, buses and cafeterias.

Our allies in this fight are workers everywhere. There is a national and international onslaught against public education. New York City schools face nearly \$1 billion in cuts. Teachers across Latin America—from Brazil to Mexico—have been carrying out massive strikes against plans to shelve the right to universal and free public schooling.

All the cuts are emanating from the highest levels of the capitalist system. With Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds running out in districts across the US, schools are facing a budgetary cliff. There will be no help from Congress, where the Democrats and Republicans are preparing to pass Biden's \$1 trillion budget for war paid for by a similar amount cut from social programs.

With untold trillions invested in a rapidly-escalating war for US global hegemony, the smooth operation of the US economy is more and more being framed as a "national security" issue. Biden, the self-proclaimed "most pro-union president in history," has already intervened twice in the past year to illegalize or block strikes by rail workers and dock workers.

In this growing class struggle, workers everywhere are facing runaway inflation, job cuts, health crises and the subordination of basic rights to the profit interests of Wall Street.

Educators need to reckon with the fact that the unions—the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) and union locals like the DFT—are not workers' organizations fighting for the needs of educators and controlled by them. Far from it! They are completely tied to the war-mongering Democratic Party that is imposing these cuts. Staffed with functionaries making between \$150,000 and \$500,000 annually, these "unions" work to

suppress strikes or betray them, while funneling hundreds of millions of dollars to Biden's next presidential run.

Among the most dangerous lies are the claims of the DFT, alongside DPSCD Superintendent Nikolai Vitti, that cuts to the district are the result of "disproportionate funding," i.e., racism. With this, the union washes its hands of responsibility, cries "take the fight to Lansing," and preaches subordination to the Democratic Party.

The aim of racial politics is to divide the working class and prevent a unified fight of all workers against austerity. The attacks on public education are a class issue and a worldwide issue—not a racial one, and not one particular to Detroit. Both political parties are responsible.

The pseudo-left groups—By Any Means Necessary (BAMN) and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)—filled with careerist opportunists, function as the loyal opposition within the DFT—emphasis on "loyal." Both push the same racist line as the unions and Vitti, while covering up for the role of the Democratic Party. BAMN's signature demand, "Vitti out!", is a cynical attempt to use the justly-hated superintendent as a lightning rod to diffuse opposition and leave the politicians and the pro-capitalist political structure intact.

We call on educators in Detroit to draw the lessons of years of betrayals at the hands of the unions and their pseudo-left apologists. We can and must take a new road of struggle. It is time to link up with our working class allies in districts and industries across the US and internationally!

In Detroit, teachers have already won important support from autoworkers. Members of the Michigan Rank and File Educators Safety Committee campaigned at Stellantis Warren Truck and drew the parallels between the conditions of teachers and those of autoworkers. They were warmly welcomed by United Auto Workers members, who spoke about multiple "tiers" in pay and benefits, the use of "temporary" work status, and years of concessionary contracts imposed by the UAW.

The working class, including educators, are the powerhouse of society. We create all the wealth. Instead of begging the capitalist powers-that-be, we must turn to our brothers and sisters in the working class as a whole. We will find co-thinkers across industries whose workers are being organized by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Join us now by filling out the form at wsws.org/esafety!



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