

As Detroit school workers' contracts set to expire, the unions openly sabotage a fight

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Attend an online meeting on Monday, August 14, at 7 p.m. EDT to unite the struggles of University of Michigan graduate students, Detroit teachers, workers and parents to oppose the assault on wages, living conditions and education. The meeting is hosted by the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at UM and Wayne State University. Register here.

With only days left before the expiration of contracts for thousands of Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) employees, none of the eight unions involved has held a strike vote or disclosed any concrete demands.

The largest union, the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has been in negotiations for months and is working on a contract extension, expiring August 20.

Fully aware of the anger brewing among educators, the DFT has apparently canceled its regular monthly union meeting. This is fully in line with the complete stonewalling of the membership throughout the negotiations. It is a sign of bureaucracy's well-placed fear that educators will link up with autoworkers, whose contract expires September 14, and the growing pressure by workers—from Yellow freight drivers to actors and screenwriters—across the US and internationally seeking to make up for raging inflation and years of concessions.

"We haven't heard enough from the union," a DFT teacher told the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (MERFSC). "That's the frustrating part. If they were transparent, saying, 'this is what we're being offered, this is what we're countering with, and we want your input, what do you think?' But it has just been crickets all summer. They should be sharing with us what they are bargaining for."

At the June 8 union meeting, DFT President Lakia Wilson-Lumpkins came under direct attack by teachers for rejecting out-of-hand the principle of "no contract, no work." She went on to rule out a strike at all, covering her betrayal by citing Michigan's anti-strike laws, saying "I'd be the one going to jail."

This week, teachers were sent email instructions to "Be Ready!" for "Watch Week Actions." These included adopting a Facebook frame of "the mighty DFT #wearewaiting" and making virtual comments at the August 8 school board meeting. These typical acts of complete prostration by the union were followed by a supplied text for comments, asking for "competitive" pay and a worthless "commitment" from the district.

In fact, the DFT is "waiting" for the Michigan AFT, currently preoccupied with sabotaging the five-month-long strike by the University of Michigan Graduate Employees Organization (GEO), to effect a sellout in Ann Arbor and then move on to enforcing a betrayal in Detroit. Most Detroit educators have not been made aware of the brutal promise by the massively-endowed U-M to fire GEO/AFT strikers and the impossible poverty pay which AFT graduate students endure, much less rallied by the unions to fight for the rights of educators across the state.

Detroit school workers, nevertheless, are frustrated and angry with the do-nothing policy of "waiting." Inflation, job losses, crushing workloads and unsafe school buildings are just some of the issues which they raised with the WSWS.

One teacher said, "A raise is the biggest thing. I also heard our insurance premiums could increase this year, which, if that happens, I'm going on my husband's healthcare. But not all teachers are that lucky, and it's not OK. I'm a strong proponent for paid maternity leave, which we currently have none at all! It's wild to me because we're in the business of caring for other people's children."

She also spoke about the devastating cuts taking place across the district. "We lost a number of teachers, including three math teachers and two English teachers, and more. It means that we are losing electives, like psychology, because with fewer teachers we all have to teach our core content all the time.

"They've cut summer school, which is where students can recover credits, and instead they're having students do online credit recovery, which is not a valuable experience. They are just watching videos and they get no learning experience with a teacher in front of them at all. It would be nice to put them back in a classroom if we had the seats to do it, but we are stretched so thin and there's no room in the classrooms."

The DPSCD's wave of job cuts over the summer included a mass elimination of paraprofessionals, college transition advisors, academic deans, contracted nurses and other essential staff. The district has also ended the award-winning Summer Learning Experience and carried out school-by-school cuts, resulting in further programs eliminated, including the highly successful Bates Academy music department.

Far from the DFT mobilizing to fight these cuts, Wilson-Lumpkins cynically 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.”

At the August 8 DPSCD School Board meeting, Superintendent Nikolai Vitti—responsible for imposing \$300 million in cuts on the district this year—noted truthfully, “DFT and the district want the same thing,” and expressing his “confidence” that an agreement would be reached before the school start date of August 31.

The “same thing” that the AFT/DFT and DPSCD want is to push through an agreement dictated by the administration providing minimal pay increases well below inflation, and other concessions—an agreement no doubt already worked out behind the back of educators. They are also carrying out the bidding of the Democratic Party administrations of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer and President Joe Biden. The centerpiece of Biden’s domestic policy has been hiking interest rates and driving up unemployment to lower real wage rates and boost profitability, while relying on the unions to force through sellout contracts.

Fearful of the growing opposition among workers, the school board censored comments for the first time—a violation of Michigan’s Open Meetings Act. MERFSC members as well as supporters of the pseudo-left Equal Opportunity Now/By Any Means Necessary (EON/BAMN) were selectively prevented from speaking.

Tellingly, the board failed to interfere with the comments of DFT union officials, including Wilson-Lumpkins and Executive Board member Crystal Lee. The DFT leaders dutifully promoted the reactionary nostrum that Detroit teachers face “uncompetitive” salaries, implying the cause of inadequate pay is racism. Superintendent Vitti likewise blames racism, claiming he too is a victim of the situation.

This calculated lie has the purpose of deflecting the attention of teachers away from the role of the Democratic Party in imposing billions of dollars of cuts to education, particularly escalated during the Obama administration. It further serves to cover up the unions’ decades of betrayals, including the suppression of the 2018–19 national strike wave, the Detroit sickouts and their unending record of sellouts. Above all, the use of racial identity politics aims to divide the working class and prevent a unified struggle.

As to the phony claim of noncompetitiveness, starting teacher salary in the state averages \$38,963 compared to Detroit at \$51,000. Public education has been systematically starved of resources all over the state, not just in Detroit.

Another DPSCD educator told the WSWS, “Of course, we need more pay! The union has been tight-lipped and there needs to be a call to action.” She cited other critical needs that the union has not addressed including, “Honoring seniority, protecting FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act], smaller class sizes, and building maintenance.” She pointed out that the schools are still “raggedy” with unsafe grounds, elevators that don’t work and heaters that fail, forcing educators to bring in their own fans and space heaters to keep their classrooms functional.

Rochelle, a Michigan educator and member of the MERFSC, denounced the attacks on all Detroit educators, emphasizing the reduction of paraprofessionals and nurses and the increased workloads. She said, “We are all in the same boat. It just might depend on which of our contracts are up and what we are

experiencing with our local school boards. They are all up against limited funds and they have cut a lot of funding around COVID.”

Referring to both the union and the Biden administration, Rochelle said, “They are trying to tamp down what is a rising issue to all workers—stagnant wages and cuts. I took a \$22,000 pay cut. They know there is all this discontent. [AFT President Randi] Weingarten is working behind the scenes with the Biden administration.”

Rochelle added her encouragement to other educators to join the MERFSC because of its connection to workers internationally through the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees: “I think it is so important that we have somebody that has our interests first, and to provide a structure. It is important to have committees that are not local or national. They always try to pit us against each other. The only way forward for the quality of human life on the planet is to unite for socialism.”

The following demands were ratified by the MERFSC. They are based on what educators need, not what Wall Street and its two parties of big business are prepared to pay.

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.

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.

All Michigan educators, students and workers supporting this fight to get involved today and attend the meeting on Monday, August 14. *Register here.*



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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