

Michigan Educators Rank and File Safety Committee says, “Vote No!”

Detroit teachers face snap vote on concessionary contract that keeps all budget cuts in place

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Register now to attend our online meeting on Saturday, August 26, 1 p.m. EDT. Fill out the form at the end of this article for more information on joining the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

On Monday evening, Detroit educators were presented selective information about a tentative agreement the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) signed just hours before the August 21 contract expiration. Detroit, with about 4,200 educators, is the largest school district in Michigan.

After months of negotiations with the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), the DFT concluded a backroom and concessionary contract that keeps in effect \$300 million in budget cuts.

Fearing widespread opposition, the DFT called a remote-only meeting on Monday night instead of an in-person mass meeting, and even disabled the chat feature so educators could not express their opposition. The quick summary of the agreement was confusing and inconsistent.

The DFT apparatus has insisted that all voting be concluded by Thursday, 5 p.m. This is characteristic of the bureaucracy’s high-handed refusal to even entertain input from members throughout the negotiations.

To add insult to injury, the electronic voting survey includes language that amounts to blackmail. The survey says:

YES—I vote to ACCEPT the agreement negotiated by the Bargaining Team.

I understand that voting YES results in accepting the one-year collective bargaining agreement (2023–2024) with wage increases and wage supplements for all DFT members, and step movement.

NO—I vote to REJECT the agreement.

I understand that voting NO means the District and the DFT Bargaining Team will return to negotiations, which will result in working under last year’s salaries and wages while negotiations continue, and will delay any pay increases.

? Yes

? No

The union bureaucracy excludes any scenario where there is a strike. It is enforcing the legal provisions criminalizing strikes by public employees that Democratic Governor Whitmer and the Democratic-controlled legislature kept in place when they repealed Michigan’s anti-union “Right

to Work” law.

One might ask, “What is the DFT afraid of?” Any knowledge of the history of Detroit labor struggles provides the answer.

The DFT apparatus fears the militancy of educators, especially with a looming strike among 150,000 autoworkers. No doubt, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) hierarchy in Washington D.C., union President Randi Weingarten and the Biden administration are worried that the well-known militancy of Detroit teachers could escalate the growing counteroffensive of workers to win their rights.

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee (MERFC) urges a “No” vote. Given what teachers have been told so far—below-inflation wage increases (possibly no wage raises, simply bonuses), no COVID protection, no rescinding of job cuts and more, coupled with the limited and confusing information provided at the meeting and the manner in which the negotiations and the tentative agreement (TA) are being handled—the proposed contract can be nothing other than a slap in the face of hard-working educators.

Rejection of this deal should become the beginning of a new phase of struggle by educators. Teachers require new leadership and new organizations of struggle that are democratically organized. The MERFC is aligned with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and fights for what workers need, not what the powers-that-be claim is affordable.

What is in the TA?

At the online briefing Monday night, DFT Retirement Counselor Patrick Falcusan called the TA a major advance on wages—the best in 34 years—with a 6 percent wage increase in the one-year agreement. This claim, however, was not substantiated in the slides, which only showed a 6 percent increase in one category: “the top step of the DFT unit member not on the salary schedule.” (As a result of numerous concessions, a bifurcated system of pay scales exists in the Detroit Public Schools Community District.)

In any case, a 6 percent increase would itself be an insult to teachers who have faced years of concessionary contracts and have fallen further and further behind the cost of living. Last year’s official inflation rate was

over 9 percent. It should be noted that DPSCD Superintendent Nikolai Vitti's budget projects a 75 percent increase to cover utility costs since 2019. Yet educators have struggled to keep their own lights on, with wage increases of only 4 percent in each of the last two years.

What *was* shown in the DFT slides was a series of one-time bonus payments, which will be taxed and not rolled into base pay or counted towards pensions. According to the presentation, unit members will receive a \$2,000 retention bonus in the last week of November, with part-timers receiving \$1,000 at the end of the school year. The top step of the DFT salary schedule will increase. Those with 15 years or more will receive a \$4,500 longevity payment, while those with less than 15 years will receive \$2,000 in a supplemental retention payment.

Other DFT job categories such as nurses, occupational therapists and physical therapists will receive \$2,000 in one-time payments, divided into four parts across the year. Indicating the desperate need for ESE (Exceptional Student Education, otherwise known as special ed) teachers, those who are "assigned to teach in ESE classrooms" will receive a one-time bonus of \$15,000.

Moreover, many of these bonuses will only be paid at the end of the school year, in June 2024.

All in all, these pay proposals leave teachers behind the rate of inflation, behind many other districts and behind in their bills! This is generating enormous anger among educators and parents alike.

Of crucial concern to teachers is the current surge of COVID-19. With all federal and state funding ended, COVID cases have risen by 80 percent over the past several weeks and dangerous new variants are developing. Under these conditions, the DFT-endorsed TA provides no COVID sick time and no funding for classroom air filtration, masks or other safety precautions. The contracted school nurses have been eliminated for the new school year, just as cases have begun to escalate.

What explains the DFT policy?

No wonder the DFT bureaucracy stonewalled discussion from the membership throughout negotiations! This contract is a sellout. It was dictated by the district and paid for through the elimination of over 100 positions and the shutdown of essential programs such as the Summer Learning Experience.

Superintendent Vitti acknowledged as much last Friday, telling the media:

This year, the school board and I made hard decisions, including staff reductions, to free reoccurring revenue to allow for another salary increase next year at levels exceeding previous record-high DPSCD teacher salary increases. I am confident that the District and DFT will reach an agreement soon.

Far from mobilizing educators to fight for substantial pay and benefit increases alongside the retention and expansion of support workers, DFT President Lokia Wilson-Lumpkins hailed the quid pro quo of retaining DFT dues-paying attendance officers at the expense of non-DFT paraprofessionals. She described it as a "victory," demonstrating once again that the union's priority is not saving jobs or defending education, but maintaining the dues stream that funds the union apparatus.

As Vitti remarked at the most recent school board meeting, both he and the DFT leadership want "the same thing"—that is, to prevent a struggle by school workers, especially under conditions of the "hot labor summer."

The DPSCD wants to impose austerity and keep workers divided, while the DFT wants to ensure its "seat at the table" by suppressing strike action. The bottom line is that the DFT toes the line of the Democratic Party, which also controls the DPSCD.

What does the Democratic Party want? Its main domestic strategy under Biden is to raise interest rates and drive up unemployment, while suppressing wages to keep Wall Street profits at record high levels. To that end, Biden illegalized a strike by railroad workers.

But the preeminent focus of the Biden administration is ever-escalating war to defend American global hegemony, despite the threat of nuclear war. With trillions funneled into the pockets of the military contractors, there is "no money" for schools or social programs.

The MERFC program

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee (MERFC)—which fights for what workers need, not what Democrats or Republicans say is feasible—calls for:

• **No confidence in the DFT/AFT bureaucracy!** No snap vote! School workers must have ample time to scrutinize the deal hatched behind our backs between the DPSCD and the AFT apparatus. Any further discussions between these parties must be monitored by trusted rank-and-file workers and livestreamed publicly. We call for a mass membership meeting in person, with full democratic discussion. Every member must receive a ballot.

• **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 it 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!** No cuts to any enrichment programs, carried out with the excuse that "COVID money" is over.

• **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 say the needs of the working class must take precedence over the claims of Wall Street. Our aim is to unify the working class—across all divisions of race, part-time or full-time status, language, nationality, whether union or nonunion—and fight for a vast expansion of public education and against war. We are well aware that this requires a massive redistribution of wealth—from the pockets of the filthy rich to the working class. The working class is on the move and is looking to defend its rights.

This is why we are part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees. We urge you to join today.

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