

Detroit teacher: “The UAW is preparing to strike... we should join them”

Detroit Federation of Teachers claims ratification of concessionary contract, sparking anger and disbelief

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According to the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), a contract agreement with the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) was ratified by a vote of 1,121 to 406. The DFT announced the outcome on Friday, August 25, with classes resuming for the city’s 48,000 children today, August 28. Detroit is the largest school district in Michigan.

The ratification announcement was greeted with both skepticism and anger by educators, who immediately let their thoughts be known on social media. “I’m sorry, but I don’t believe these numbers!!” said N’shan, “And if they are, I’m so disappointed,” she added.

Montee said, “People don’t trust the voting process at all,” and Geralyn asked, “Did we even have enough members to support the TA? Not sure if we had to meet a quorum?” Responding, Laceta, added, “They lie so much.” Tracey described the process as “regurgitat[ing] the emergency managers” and “just unacceptable.”

Significantly, an anonymous poster channeled the thinking of many by asking, “What’s the plan for Monday? The UAW is preparing to strike... we should join them.”

Autoworkers, like educators, are seeking to reverse years of concessions and assert their right to decent wages, job security, pensions and more. Some 150,000 autoworkers voted last week by 97 percent to authorize a walkout.

The DFT bureaucracy, along with the American Federation Teachers, headed by Randi Weingarten, is anxious to prevent Detroit teachers from doing just that—joining the ranks of striking autoworkers and the growing list of struggles, from actors and screenwriters to Youngstown, Ohio teachers.

Weingarten, a member of the Democratic National Committee, is carrying out President Biden’s key domestic policy—suppressing wages, keeping profit-taking high and funneling the lion’s share of national assets into predatory wars. To this end, the AFT and its local affiliate, the Graduate Students’ Organization (GEO), shut down the five-month strike

by graduate student instructors at nearby University of Michigan the same day as the DFT ratification announcement, August 25.

Over the past few months, all the stops have been pulled out by both the school district and the AFT apparatus to sabotage the fight of Detroit educators, long known for their militancy.

But despite these efforts, the DFT-endorsed tentative agreement obtained the votes of only 1,121 educators, roughly 26 percent of the 4,300 DFT membership. This, of course, assumes that the DFT is telling the truth about the ratification vote. What remains incontestable is that the overwhelming majority of members either did not vote or voted “no.” In other words, the biggest vote was one of “no confidence” in the DFT apparatus.

The vote itself was the culmination of a “bargaining” charade by the DFT in which educators were blocked from participating. Those who rose to ask questions about the union’s demands or bargaining positions during union meetings were shut down and bullied by DFT President Lakia Wilson-Lumpkins. There was never a strike vote by the membership.

The actions of the union bureaucracy amounted to a conspiracy against the membership, with the aim of initialing an agreement dictated by the DPSCD administration. Throughout, Wilson-Lumpkins and the rest of the DFT leadership opposed mobilizing teachers against the district’s \$300 million in budget cuts, rejected the elementary principle of “no contract, no work,” and refused to entertain the demands of the educators themselves.

DPSCD Superintendent Nikolai Vitti was allowed a free hand to eliminate over 300 positions, including para-educators, academic deans, college transition advisors and contracted nurses, and to impose school-by-school budget cuts that will affect many programs. Among the cuts is the award-winning summer school program, which provided enrichments, sports

and academic support.

Further, as the largest union in the DPSCD, the DFT signed its own separate backroom deal with the administration, refusing to mount a united front with the district's other unions, whose contracts expired at the same time. Wilson-Lumpkins shamefully referred to the elimination of paraprofessionals [members of the Detroit Federation of Para-Professionals] as a "victory" because DFT dues-paying members' jobs were retained in a treacherous trade-off.

The tentative agreement (TA) was announced within hours of the August 21 contract deadline. A hurried online membership meeting was held, but allowed for no comments, even in the form of chats, and provided no copy of the agreement.

After several "glitches," educators finally received a copy of the TA on Wednesday August 23. The document, endorsed by entire executive board of the union, allowed all the administration's cuts. It provided below-inflation pay raises of 6 percent, and only for those at the top of the salary schedule. Other educators were granted only small bonuses, which will neither count towards retirement nor be rolled into base wages.

The contract is a sellout that meets none of the needs of educators, who want to recoup after years of cuts and either below-inflation wage increases or bonuses. Also of crucial concern to teachers is the current surge of COVID-19. School districts are already being forced to close.

Last week, Lee County, Kentucky's school reported 20 percent of the student body out sick. 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 surge.

The ballots were carefully formulated to deny the membership's right to strike. The first option was "accept[ing] the one-year collective bargaining agreement (2023-2024) with wage increases and wage supplements for all DFT members, and step movement." The second option was returning "the DFT Bargaining Team... to negotiations, which will result in working under last year's salaries and wages... and delay any pay increases."

The second option was a thinly veiled threat along the lines: "If you reject this, you'll not get even the token increases we've brokered, and we don't intend to fight for anything more."

There was no third option: "Strike Monday, August 28. Unite all Detroit school workers in a walkout against budget cuts and chronically low pay."

There remains not a shred of workers' democracy in the DFT. The teacher's Facebook reference to cuts imposed by edict under the rule of emergency managers is entirely appropriate. But the edicts today are being imposed by the DFT apparatus itself.

Many educators vented their disgust on Facebook, calling for a "new union." A few examples provide a glimpse of the deep

anger over the DFT betrayal.

Montee wrote: "People don't pay dues because they don't like how the union operates."

Tracey said: "I identified the problem, we need a new union."

Kelly wrote: "Paying dues at this point is like paying \$820 to be screwed... Break it and start over. This union hasn't been for us in a long time."

Taylor declared: "We need new leadership and if that means stopping this leadership by stop paying dues and start a new one, then so be it."

Educators, like all workers today, need new leadership and new forms of organization to successfully unify their struggles and mobilize their strength. The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (MERFSC) urged a "No" vote on the contract. Above all, the MERFSC calls for a new phase of the struggle. Teachers are fighting against both the government-imposed cuts and the corrupt union leadership. The "ratification" of this TA changes none of that.

It is not a matter of swapping out one bureaucrat for another or simply bringing in another union. What is needed is a new approach—that which is fought for by the MERFC, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees.

1) We do not accept austerity. It is a lie that there is "no money" to meet the crying needs of educators, students and workers. In Detroit alone, hundreds of millions of dollars have been squandered in tax cuts for the billionaire real estate magnates Dan Gilbert and the Illich family. More than \$1 trillion has been sent by the State of Michigan to the coffers of Ford Motor Company, with millions more headed to General Motors, in the guise of "saving jobs." The Biden administration has prioritized war preparation, allocating hundreds of millions to military contractors.

2) We fight for the self-organization of workers, with complete transparency and democratic rights, accountable to the working class itself. Our allies are workers, regardless of race, nationality, job or union status. Educators, and indeed all workers, are part of a single movement of the working class across the United States and around the world.

3) We call for a massive redistribution of wealth—from the pockets of the ruling elites to the working class, which produces that wealth. We fight for what the working class needs, not what the corporate-controlled Democrats and Republicans claim is affordable.



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