

“I am tired of fighting for the bare minimum”

Detroit teachers denounce DFT union’s last-minute sellout deal, low pay, and unsanitary, unsafe working conditions

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On the eve of the beginning of the school year and within hours of the expiration of the last contract, the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) signed a tentative agreement and held a snap vote of the membership. Continuing the months-long stonewalling of input from educators, the union bureaucracy then quickly announced that the deal passed and demanded teachers report to their schools for the first scheduled workday, Monday, August 28. Detroit is the state’s largest school district and serves 48,000 students.

“The contract was unfair,” said a Detroit Public School Community District (DPSCD) educator to the WSWS, echoing a widespread feeling across the district.

The one-year contract was a betrayal on many levels. Teachers have told the WSWS they are angry over many issues—pay, benefits, the disrepair of the schools, and especially the underhanded and undemocratic method used by the Detroit Federation of Teachers to push through a settlement at their expense.

Many greeted the union apparatus’s claim of an 1,121-to-406 passage with deep skepticism; some said they never even received ballots. The overwhelming majority of the district’s 4,300 teachers did not vote at all.

To prevent any input from educators, the DFT held only one meeting to review the contract. It was online and allowed for no opposition to be voiced. Teachers on the call did not even have a copy of the final agreement to review themselves.

“There was no time for teachers to go through it; they [the DFT] turned off the chat,” a recently retired teacher described. “It shows the devious, deliberate measures to stop the people from knowing what’s going on.

“Our union was in bed with them. Now we see a

contract settled with secret negotiations, a last-minute contract, and no way for teachers to read it.” She emphasized, “Your article said it, this is not democracy at all.”

“Before [DPSCD Superintendent Nikolai] Vitti, we had emergency managers who claimed there was no money for pay or to give raises. There was a decline in property taxes, and the economy went down, so we teachers tried to help. We loaned the district money—10 percent of our pay. We had to take DPS to court to get the money we loaned the district back. The loan we gave the district was then turned into a permanent pay cut.”

Decades ago, “When [former DFT President] John Elliot negotiated a contract we didn’t like, we all walked out of the Joe Louis Arena. We struck a couple of times. Now they’ve enacted a law to penalize strikers for thousands of dollars, and they’ve put fear into teachers.”

The DFT’s parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has sabotaged strikes from coast to coast, including the recent sellout of graduate student instructors at the University of Michigan in nearby Ann Arbor. The AFT bureaucracy was exceedingly anxious to prevent a teachers’ strike in Detroit just as 150,000 autoworkers voted by 97 percent to strike as of September 15.

By contrast, uniting the working class across job classifications, age groups, and nationalities is at the heart of program of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (MERFSC), affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). MERFSC organized a team of educators to speak to autoworkers at Stellantis last July. Both sections of workers found they faced similar

concerns—years of cuts and impossible working conditions.

As the DFT contract was expiring, an educator posted on Facebook, “What’s the plan for Monday? The UAW is preparing to strike ... we should join them!”

The veteran teacher described to the WSWS years of anti-democratic policies in the DFT. “I stopped paying dues [to the DFT] when Steven [Conn] was removed as president. How did that happen? We had voted him in. They took away my right to vote for president. They weren’t acting like a union but an arm of administration. How is it a democracy if the democratically elected leader is deposed and replaced by an agent of the State?”

“In my 28-year career, I only called the union one time, and they didn’t support me. They came out on the side of the principal.”

She noted the terrible conditions in her classroom, which were also brought to light in a wave of 2015-16 teacher sickouts but were never fixed. “My school had mice and roaches. Every summer after we came back to school, the mice had eaten through all the papers in our desks. All they [the administration] did was put down sticky paper. I had a dead mouse in my classroom. It was disgusting. And we were afraid to drink from the water fountains because of lead.”

Another educator told the WSWS, “My parents were teachers, and they were always in the union. But the DFT isn’t doing enough. They claim they can’t answer emails and return calls because they ‘used to have 10,000’ members.

“If I’m a state employee, why is my pension lower?” she added, refuting the claims that there is ‘no money’ for education. “But they take the money from the lottery, put it in the School Aid Fund, and then move it to the General Fund.” This shell game has been long used to funnel resources into corporate tax breaks and other big business boondoggles.

“I like the 6 percent pay increase. But there’s a lot I’m not happy with. Last year as a lead teacher, I had a \$3,000 stipend. This year nothing, but the same job. No one has told me why, and the union hasn’t replied to me.

“Then there’s the medical. I buy the top plan, but I could never afford it if it weren’t just me. I’m putting in \$200 a paycheck. But when my doctor gave me a prescription, I still had a \$150 deductible. I went back and told him that I couldn’t take that medicine.

“Originally, we were cut 10 percent,” she said, referring to the Termination Incentive Plan foisted on Detroit teachers in 2009 under Emergency Manager Robert Bobb

and DFT President Keith Johnson. “We never got it back. In other words, I shouldn’t just be getting 6 percent, but 16 percent.

“Last year, my building caught fire. We got moved from school to school, and now we are in a school built in the 1920s. It’s got asbestos, mold, lead paint, no air conditioning, cracked tiles on the floor, and it’s hot and musty. No one has told us how long we will be there.

“Also, this is a [DPSCD] charter school. I hate charter schools. How much more money would be available for DPSCD without them? Charters were created to destroy public education. In Michigan, we don’t have vouchers, but the money is handed over to for-profit charters.”

The educator then reflected on the claims that there is no money for schools, saying, “We have more money in the military than any other country by leaps and bounds. They should put way more money into education and less into incarceration—which is also for profit.”

On August 26, the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) held a joint meeting to discuss the sabotage of the struggles both in Detroit and Ann Arbor by the AFT apparatus and the necessary lessons to take forward the fight for educators’ rights.

Khara, a DPSCD teacher, pointed out, “The entire experience demonstrates that the [DFT/AFT] bureaucracy is impervious to pressure from below. Instead, workers have to organize a rebellion against the apparatus and develop rank-and-file structures that return control to the workers, where it belongs.”

We urge educators to begin today by joining the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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