

“The UAW lacks integrity because they could have brought everyone out at once”

Michigan teachers support autoworkers’ struggle against Big Three and UAW apparatus

Our reporters
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We urge educators to join the online meetings of the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network to discuss uniting the entire working class against austerity and war. Text AUTO to (866) 847-1086 for updates and register here to attend.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (ERFSC) is campaigning to support the struggle by GM, Ford and Stellantis workers against poverty pay, unsafe working conditions, growing exploitation, victimizations and years of concessions in pensions and healthcare. The fight has highlighted the immense social inequality in America, with the corporations raking in \$300 billion in profits over the last 15 years while once-coveted auto jobs pay starting wages below what many fast food restaurants pay.

Like autoworkers, educators and young people are currently locked in struggle over many of the same issues, with mass protests against cuts in Germany, sickouts in Las Vegas, the formation of the Teacher-Student-Parent Action Committee (TSPAC) in Sri Lanka, recent protests and strikes in Ohio, West Virginia and Washington State, a looming strike of academic workers at the California State University, walkouts in dozens of UK colleges, and much more.

The ERFSC issued a statement calling on educators to support the auto strike, warning of the role of the United Auto Workers bureaucracy—which has kept nearly 90 percent of workers on the job after calling limited strikes—and calling for the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to take the escalating class struggle out of the hands of the highly-paid union apparatus and put it in the hands of workers themselves. ERFSC members discussed these issues with educators emphasizing the need to unify the working class against austerity and war.

“I’m all for support to the autoworkers,” said a Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) teacher who recently retired. “All these struggles bleed over. Workers’

rights are workers’ rights, no matter what profession.

“Teachers should be out there on the picket lines if possible. We should support the autoworkers now, and they’d be there for us in the future.

“Workers are constantly giving, giving, giving—and the higher-ups are taking, taking, taking. And they get astronomical salaries for sitting in luxurious offices. They try to keep it private, but when we find out, it’s disgusting. We do the work, we should get most of the pay.

“There needs to be a shakeup. I know the UAW president talks a good game. But I’ve grown not to trust the union officials anymore. I’ve seen my union sell us out to the school board. I believe they are negotiating behind our backs. The people running the unions are paid under the table to sell us out.”

This warning to autoworkers comes from experience. She and many other DPSCD educators are livid over the Detroit Federation of Teachers’ undemocratic imposition of a contract imposed on the eve of the school year start on August 28. Desperately fearful of a militant teachers’ strike coinciding with a nationwide autoworkers strike, the DFT bureaucracy ignored the district’s elimination of 300 jobs and signed on to a series of bonuses in lieu of across-the-board wage increases in line with inflation.

This is only the latest in a long line of such betrayals, including the DFT’s collusion in the 2016 bankruptcy restructuring of the Detroit school district, which was modeled after the restructuring of GM and Chrysler. The 2016 sickouts by Detroit teachers against underfunding and deplorable conditions in the schools were a prelude to the wave of wildcat strikes that would erupt across the country in 2018-19, starting in West Virginia.

Rochelle, a member of the Michigan Educators Rank and File Safety Committee, also warned about the role of the UAW apparatus. She began by pointing to the Canadian

autoworkers' settlement, "I find it hard to believe that a contract that is supposedly 'historic' and 'life changing' would only pass by 54 percent." Unifor President Lana Payne made this lying claim as the union violated its own constitution to impose a sellout contract over strong rank-and-file opposition, which maintains the two-tier wage and benefit system and includes a virtual freeze in real wages.

"There seems to be a pattern developing with strikes and the union apparatus—isolate and/or quickly call the strikers off, TAs [tentative agreements] made, and workers being given little time to review the agreement along with no open format to discuss the new contract among other rank-and-file members. Although there is lots of opposition, the contract passes by a narrow margin."

She also commented on the fraudulent "Save the American Dream" rally held by the UAW bureaucracy Friday, September 15. The staged event held in downtown Detroit was largely a gathering of well-heeled union functionaries designed to give UAW President Shawn Fain, and assorted Democrats including Senator Bernie Sanders, a platform to masquerade as fighters for workers' interests.

"The rally with Bernie Sanders was all for show," Rochelle said. "They are not going to do anything to benefit the workers. Sanders was brought to the rally because he is the one person, as far as Congress and the Democratic Party go, who appears to be most friendly to the workers. But in terms of taking on the corporate class, Sanders is never going to do anything.

"It was a diversionary thing, 'Look over here,' while the UAW collaborates behind the autoworkers' backs to work out a deal that does not meet the needs of the rank and file."

Rochelle cited the UAW hierarchy's now common practice of making workers vote again and again on contracts until they "get it right" or the vote is rigged. Among the notoriously poor contracts "settled" this way were: Caterpillar, Volvo, John Deere, Dana, Navistar and Clarios. Currently, workers at Lear in Hammond, Indiana are being kept on the job despite rejecting a UAW-backed contract for the third time.

"The pattern is that they don't give workers a chance to review the contracts, then push them through. This happened at UPS and I remember Volvo Trucks was similar. There should be a by-law that everyone has at least a week to review the contract before there is a vote."

"Not calling out all the workers is half-assed," Rochelle said, referring to Fain's bogus "stand up strike" policy which involves only 12 percent of the members. "I want to address the union's policy of isolating workers. During the American Axle strike in 2008, the UAW isolated that strike and then kept them out with only starvation strike pay. The idea was to break the strikers down until they accepted the contract with the same wage cuts the company demanded in the first place.

"The UAW lacks integrity because they could have brought everyone out at once and instead only a few are actually on strike."

Speaking directly to autoworkers, a Detroit-area teacher noted the historic role of the UAW in winning basic rights for the entire working class, "Be strong, we're with you. They boosted teachers' wages because of the auto workers, and [we won] the 40-hour workweek and vacations. You could have a family home.

"My dad worked as an engineer but, I'm telling you, he was all tied to the auto industry. Because of that, we were able to have summer vacations; we had a camper.

"Now I don't know how families are making it. You can't learn if you're not safe, and that's what a lot of our students don't have. Their parents will usually be working two jobs, so they're raising their younger siblings. It's really hard on the kids.

"Our kids have a lot of strength. Our inner city kids have so much on them that they're not really children.... Our people here are all legal immigrants, but if they don't speak English, they're forced into jobs where they work 60 hours a week. They work really hard but don't get paid overtime or they're threatened with job loss."

Another young educator in the Hamtramck district took a copy of the statement entitled "Unite educators and all workers behind the autoworkers' strike! End poverty wages and unsafe conditions!" and signed up for more information.

Expressing solidarity with autoworkers, she told the ERFSC that she and her coworkers also faced unsafe and unsanitary conditions. "Our buildings are our biggest problem. They are not cleaned every day. In fact, sometimes they don't even take out the trash. The basement has mold. Since I've started there, my asthma has gotten worse. I got an air filter; it didn't help.

"We got the COVID money, but the air quality in the building is no better. Our opinion as teachers is not valued. It is hard to get mental health services for our students, we don't get updates on our special needs kids regularly.

"Billions of dollars are going to war. Bombs and everything else—it's all our money. Anywhere they go, we are paying. A couple of my students said to me, 'we supported Biden for nothing.'"

She concluded, "Please send me the information for the Rank-and-File Committees."



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