

Facing over \$17 million budget shortfall, Michigan school district could lay off up to 100 workers

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Public school districts across the US, large and small, are being slammed with bipartisan-imposed budget cuts, layoffs and school closures. The end of COVID-19 funding, years of austerity budgets, a demographic decline, and the growth of charter school businesses have all combined to create a budgetary cliff.

In the Wayne-Westland Community Schools District (WWCSD), just outside Detroit, Michigan, a \$17 million budget shortfall has provoked outrage from teachers, students and parents.

On December 1, WWCSD began laying off personnel and announced it would investigate privatizing school bus services. The response of the executive director of the Wayne-Westland MEA (Michigan Education Association) Tanya Karpinski, predictably, made no attempt to launch any fight to defend the jobs of her members.

She told WXYZ-TV on December 6 that “the upcoming holidays will be tough for staff members,” who will be laid off. “They don’t know if they will be celebrating with gifts, or looking forward to the joy of family time and the holiday spirit ...”

Events since the school board meeting of October 23 have uncovered not merely negligence and possible deliberate wrongdoing, but the systematic destruction of this public school district as part of the draining of all public funding for profit and war.

The Wayne-Westland District is not unique. The same process is occurring almost everywhere across the US. In New York City, Democratic Mayor Eric Adams is dangling a sword of Damocles over city services, including \$1 billion in cuts to the Department of Education. Elsewhere in Michigan, the Detroit Public Schools Community District eliminated 100 positions over the summer, axing paraprofessional and other staff in K-12 schools. Ten

schools in Grand Rapids are on the chopping block. Grosse Pointe cut \$5 million this school year, laying off educators and staff.

The immediate trigger in Wayne-Westland was the revelation by a Plante-Moran auditor at the October 23 school board meeting that the 2023 general fund balance, as a percentage of expenditures, had shrunk to 6.2 percent from over 23 percent. However, it soon became clear that the vanishing \$17.6 million was a veil covering the precarious state of the district’s finances.

During impassioned appeals from colleagues, parents and students against the involuntary transfer of a beloved teacher at John Glenn High School, the board acknowledged that the mid-term transfer had been done without regard to the educational impact, but, in the words of student Makala Brohard, this was “a business decision that had nothing to do with students whatsoever, but with money.”

Speaking out against the disruption to the students, the teacher himself, David Daly, said, “If Wayne-Westland would rather put the business of education above the lives of our students ... they are sending a message. ... Business before students, solutions are not wanted, students are dollars, teachers are expendable ...” Concluding his remarks, Daly said, “I’m just here to shine this light on someone or some group who would seek to charterize our public school rather than recognize the human potential and irreversible harm that’s done when we put profits over people. ...”

While the implications of the budget reduction were not immediately apparent at the board meeting, within days, community members began pressing for answers on the “missing” \$17 million, which had been attributed by Plante-Moran to an increase in employee salary and benefits.

However, in a subsequent special board meeting on November 8, attended by hundreds of angry parents and students, board President David Cox explained that the district was within a hair’s breadth of the state of Michigan taking over the district if it failed to stay within 5 percent of

its budget. Detroit Public Schools Community District only exited state control in 2020, and the last district released from state control, Muskegon Heights, was in 2021.

Seeking to pin blame for the budget shortfall on the former CFO of the district, Cox claimed the state of Michigan's contribution of \$8.2 million toward the employee retirement fund, meant as a pass-through from one account to another, was never deducted from the bank in 2022, and when the 2023 budget was presented, it had been "copied and pasted" from the previous year, therefore doubling the error. He implied that another budget problem arose from the failure of the finance officer to include cost-of-living contributions into the 2023 contracts. It was not until the CFO left her position and the district called in an auditor from Wayne RESA that the discrepancy was uncovered.

However, it was during testy responses to parents' questions that Cox was most blunt about the board's vision, fully in line with the decimation of schools taking place across the country. "We need to do some budgeting so the state doesn't come in," he said. To angry boos from the audience, "We aren't right-sized," he declared, referring to enrollment since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. "We have way more teaching staff, way more paraprofessional staff." Attempting to backtrack, he said he was "happy" with the numbers and wanted to retain them, at the same time insisting that the district is staffed for 17,000 students, not the 9,400 currently enrolled.

Kevin Markey, a Spanish teacher at John Glenn High School and Michigan Education Association (MEA) contract negotiator for the past 20 years, revealed that, in fact, the union contracts "have no money listed as cost-of-living additions." He further admitted that the union had only just negotiated its first raise of 1 percent after years of wage freezes and pay cuts, which, he hoped, would prevent any more teachers leaving the district.

Noting that the WWCS D had received some of the highest increases in state funding this year, Markey asserted that the union "did not ask for excessive amounts in ANY of the MEA union contracts here in the district." After acknowledging that the union failed to lift a finger to defend the living standards of educators reeling from inflation, Markey added, "I once again offer my services and the services of our local union leadership to help analyze the expenditure in order to find out what transpired."

The MEA is partnering with the district to impose whatever cuts they deem necessary. A December 7 letter from John Dignan, WWCS D superintendent, states that the district "has heard from ... our bargaining groups," and "has decided to step back and attempt to work with the union to find a shared solution to the transportation problems." This can only mean that the bus drivers will be forced to take

substantial pay and benefit cuts unless an independent struggle of the workers is launched against both the district and the union.

There has also been deafening silence from another corner—Dylan Wegela, a newly elected Democratic Party state representative from Michigan's 26th district and member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Wegela, a self-styled "teacher activist," taught in Dearborn and represents a section of Westland in the state House.

Educators can expect no support for their struggle to defend wages and living standards from Wegela, who has quickly proven himself a run-of-the-mill Democratic Party careerist. Before running for state representative in Michigan, Wegela was instrumental in the massive betrayal of the Arizona teachers strike in 2018. As a leader of Arizona Educators United, he, along with Noah Karvelis and Rebecca Garelli, conspired with the Arizona Education Association president, behind the backs of the rank-and file teachers they claimed to represent, to limit and then shut down the historic strike.

The State of Michigan, under Democratic Party control in both branches of government, posted a \$79 billion surplus this year. With schools starving for resources, what did they elect to do? The legislature is handing billions to the automakers and other big business interests in the state.

WWCS D school bus drivers, teachers, paraprofessionals and staff must draw the lessons of these previous battles and break from the stranglehold of the MEA apparatus and the Democratic Party and expand their struggle across districts, job descriptions and workplaces.

Further, teachers and staff will find support among all sections of the working class—autoworkers, Amazon workers, healthcare workers and the entire working class—who are fighting austerity and opposing the billions being used to fund Wall Street and war. Make the first step today and join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee.



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