

“My pay has been frozen since 2014”

# Flint, Michigan teachers, living in poverty, outraged over school board’s revoking of labor contract

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Educators in Flint, Michigan, are demanding action against the school board’s sudden and unprecedented retraction of their collective bargaining agreement from last fall. Carrying signs and wearing shirts that read “No Trust,” “Strike” and “Here We Go Again,” about 200 teachers protested at the February 14 Flint Board of Education (FBOE) meeting, the first since their unanimous vote on January 17 to renege on the deal.

Flint teachers face staggering challenges educating young people in the city, the birthplace and once the center of General Motors but now made infamous for lead poisoning of its water supply in 2014. Large numbers of children suffer attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia or mild intellectual impairment as a result of lead ingestion. Meanwhile, teachers eke out a living on salaries of \$38,000 or barely above, often for years.

Despite a five-hour meeting of the Flint Board of Education (FBOE) on February 21, still no replacement settlement has been reached. According to ABC News, the union has said a strike is “not off the table.” The tentative agreement at issue, reached last October, had ended a years-long wage freeze for many teachers, but still left educators at poverty-level salaries.

The United Teachers of Flint (UTF) has not called a strike vote in response to the provocative and unprecedented abrogation of the tentative agreement, undermining teachers’ struggle against this dictatorial move by the district.

Instead, the UTF held a meaningless “no confidence” vote in the district board with 98 percent of the polled teachers voting in favor of the motion. UTF lawyers then filed an unfair labor practice lawsuit against the board and are desperately trying to avert a walkout. Indicating the hypocrisy of the maneuver, the majority of the school board, four out of seven members, had been endorsed by the UTF

in the most recent election.

School Board President Joyce Ellis-McNeal told the February 14 meeting there is a \$14 million “structural deficit” in Flint, up from \$9 million. She noted her “appreciation” for “working collaboratively” with the UFT, concluding “the Board must be fiscally responsible” and touted the Board’s “proven track record of increasing wages and health insurance benefits over the past few years.” She added, “but, there are limits.”

Teachers spoke out against the demand for more cuts. Dena Ashworth said, “My pay has been frozen since 2014... I have family members who have just become teachers in other districts who are making \$71,000 and they have less education and teaching [experience] than I do... Give us our [pay] steps!”

Another teacher said, “We have students who are affected by the water crisis. But that’s not the crisis I’m talking about. The crisis they’re in is trying to learn in overcrowded classrooms [and] not having certified teachers in every classroom.”

Karen Christian, president of the UTF, far from advocating a struggle to defend public education, advised the FBOE at the meeting on how to implement cuts, insisting on closing schools and selling assets: “Buildings are not generational wealth... You need to sell buildings that need to be used for other purposes. You need to rightsize the district... This problem is caused by spending more than you bring in.”

Michigan Education Association director Bruce Jordan added, “You got 40 buildings; 20 need to be maintained.” Jordan appealed to the politicians on the school board and referred to the UTF’s endorsement of a majority of them. “Four of you campaigned for the restoration and fiscal solvency of Flint schools. If you don’t do something soon,” he said, referring to teachers, “they’re not going to be here. They’re leaving in droves... Within a year there won’t be

enough staff to educate our kids.”

Such “helpful advice” to the school board from the union follows years of agreeing to brutal concessions. In 2013 and 2014, the UTF agreed to the layoffs of over 100 teachers and concessions totaling about \$13.5 million. Joanna Coselman, in her 23rd year of teaching at Flint Schools, told *Flintbeat* that teachers haven’t recouped their loss of income since the early 2010s. “We have never been made whole again,” Coselman said.

After the public comment session, the school board members agreed, one after another, with the calls from the union officials to close schools. Board member Melody Relerford (endorsed by the UTF) said, “We have to close schools. We need to be able to compensate the teachers ... We’ve gotta do something.”

Some board members cynically expressed concern that the large debt carried by the district will trigger a state takeover, as occurred in 2014 when the district was required to receive approval of its budget from the Michigan Department of Education. That approval was granted after the board agreed to cut \$21.9 million over seven years. UTF officials then dutifully fulfilled their role, not to their members, but to corporate interests, by extracting from their members a seven-year wage freeze and concessions worth \$8.1 million.

Just as these multimillion-dollar concessions were imposed on educators in 2014, General Motors pocketed \$1.2 million in only the first year of a 12-year 50 percent tax abatement for a new paint shop, courtesy of the city of Flint and with the blessing of United Auto Workers officials.

Expressing the bipartisan nature of the attack on public education, board treasurer Dylan Luna (also endorsed by the UTF) crowed, “If I was a Republican legislator on the west side of the state, and I saw a district ... with 20 vacant properties just sitting there, a report from Plante Moran Cresa [a real estate advisory company] that says you have way too many buildings ... I wouldn’t give you a damn dime.”

The Board then voted unanimously to close the Accelerated Learning Academy (ALA), originally known as Scott School, which was built in 1922 in the historic Civic Park neighborhood of Flint. ALA, an alternative school focusing on credit recovery, educates 277 seventh through 12th grade students. It is now slated to close in the summer of 2026.

Nineteen more school buildings are likely up for the chopping block of the school board-union joint operation. A March 2023 article by *Flintside* headlined, “Every school I ever went to in Flint is gone: Addressing Flint’s ongoing urban blight as a result of school closings,” reports that over 20 schools were closed in recent years. Last fall, the school board voted to close four additional school buildings within

three years.

Flint, the birthplace of General Motors, is the poorest city in Michigan, with approximately 50 percent of its children in living in poverty. The shutdown of the majority of GM’s sprawling manufacturing facilities from the 1980s on led to a collapse of Flint’s population and a decline in school enrollment from 46,991 in 1970 to less than 3,000 today. Moreover, as of 2017, Flint had 55 percent of their children enrolled in charter schools as public education was largely privatized.

Countless thousands of children were exposed to lead following during the water crisis caused by the disconnection of the city’s water from Detroit Water & Sewerage Department in 2014. The poisoning of the city of 100,000 caused deaths, stillbirths and lifelong learning disabilities. According to a report in the *New York Times*, a staggering 70 percent of the students evaluated by the city’s Neurodevelopmental Center of Excellence have required school accommodations for learning disabilities.

Teachers, school staff, parents and all workers must draw the necessary conclusion that it is the capitalist system itself that is the root cause of the unending attacks on public education in Flint and beyond. UTF members must break the isolation imposed on them by their corporatist union. Theirs is not just a local struggle. Teachers, school staff and all workers must unite across state, national and even international lines to mobilize the vast social power of the international working class to establish socialism as the only means of truly defending public education.

As a first step, teachers should contact and join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, to organize independently of all capitalist politicians and union bureaucracies and take the conduct of their struggle into their own hands.



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