

Flint, Michigan teachers organize sickout over district's decision to overturn pay raises

Our reporters
13 March 2024

On Wednesday, 119 public school teachers in Flint called in sick, forcing the cancellation of classes across the school district. The job action was initiated by rank-and-file educators to oppose the unilateral decision by the Democratic Party-controlled school board to overturn their labor agreement and renege on promised pay increases.

The agreement, reached last October between district officials and the United Teachers of Flint (UTF), included the first pay increase after years of wage freezes and other concessions agreed to by the UTF. For years, teachers have eked by on salaries as low as \$38,000 a year, barely above the poverty level.

On January 17, the school board voted unanimously to abrogate the contract. Large numbers of teachers turned out to protest at the last school board meeting in mid-February, where Board President Joyce Ellis-McNeal said the district had a \$14 million deficit and had to be “fiscally responsible.”

Teachers organized the sickout after frustration exploded over the UTF leadership's refusal to call a strike and its impotent protests, including organizing a “vote of no confidence” in the school board. Poorly paid teachers face overcrowded classrooms and the challenges of teaching in a city where almost 70 percent of the children grow up in poverty, five times the US average, according to the University of Michigan Center for Poverty Solutions. These challenges were made worse by the lead poisoning of the city's water supply 10 years ago, which has led to an increase in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia and other learning disabilities.

After the sickout, the UTF and Michigan Education Association leaders moved in to shut down the job action. Union officials held a press conference Wednesday afternoon where they announced that

schools would reopen Thursday. MEA Uniserv Director Bruce Jordan and UTF President Karen Christian claimed that the union would call an official strike if the Flint Board of Education does not resolve the dispute over a settlement agreement, but they did not publicly announce a date.

Later Wednesday evening, educators protested outside of the school board meeting. “We feel that [the abrogation of the contract] was a slap in the face,” one Flint teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “We don't feel appreciated; we are undervalued. Children will not get the services that they need for a quality education. In some areas, half of the teachers are substitutes and are not qualified.

“Subs have no teacher training. Some get emergency certifications, and many are not certified at all. Substitutes don't have to graduate from college, they only need a certain amount of credits. They have to take a skills test and a background check, and they can be a teacher. In our building, four of 10 teachers are substitutes.” She added, “Many teachers work second jobs. Imagine working for 10 years and making under \$40,000 a year. Almost all the younger teachers are working second jobs.”

Kinya Williams told the WSWWS, “We are standing up for the kids. We need certified teachers in the classrooms. They can't attract teachers if the pay is so low. We want reciprocity. We want to be able to meet at the table and have a fair exchange. The district should come to an agreement.”

Joelle Jordan said, “There was a pay cut, and there is no way I can financially make it. So I got another job in retail too. I would leave school, go straight to the retail store and work, sometimes to 11:00 p.m. Then I'd get up in the morning and do it all over again. It was exhausting, it was hard. I did my best to show up for

my students. I'm not the only one. There are teachers all over this district that work extra jobs."

A hypocritical statement by the school board attacking the sickout for "hurting our scholars more than anyone else" provoked a firestorm of opposition from residents of Flint who know what sacrifices teachers make. Responding to this statement on the Flint Community Schools Facebook page, one commentator wrote: "This message is so tasteless and I'm actually appalled that you all took the time to comprise it instead of taking time to stand with those who are the most valuable parts of your team! They're not striking for fun but guess what? As a PROUD graduate of Flint Schools, I'm glad some of the best teachers equipped me to stand toe to toe with you in their fight for what they deserve!"

Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for US vice president in the 2024 elections, issued a statement on X/Twitter supporting the teachers.

"I call on educators and all workers across Michigan, the US and internationally to support their fight against poverty wages, overcrowded classrooms and relentless budget cutting," White said.

He added, "A chief proximate cause of the accelerating school cuts is the Biden administration's decision to end all Federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, which expire in September 2024. The relief money, totaling roughly \$190 billion, was meant to help schools address needs arising from COVID-19, including making up for learning loss during the pandemic.

"At the same time, the Biden administration and both corporate controlled parties agreed to spend a record \$886.3 billion for the US military. The White House is seeking tens of billions more to fund Israel's genocide in Gaza and to escalate US imperialism's military conflict with Russia and China, which threatens the world with nuclear annihilation."

White concluded by stating, "Workers around the world face the same fight, and these struggles should be coordinated through the expansion of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We call on all workers throughout Flint, across Michigan and beyond to support the Flint educators.

"The working class confronts a political fight against both Biden and Trump and the two parties of austerity, war and dictatorship. The Socialist Equality Party is

fighting for socialism, the expropriation of the financial corporate oligarchy and a vast redistribution of wealth to meet social needs, not private profit."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact