“I’d like to live in a world where I work one job”: Flint, Michigan teachers vote to strike after sickout over pay and conditions

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Educators in Flint, Michigan staged, a powerful sickout Wednesday, March 13, shutting all 11 public schools to protest the abrogation of the tentative agreement the teachers union reached with district officials last October and the cancellation of their pay raises. As a result, the United Teachers of Flint (UTF) was forced to call a snap union meeting Wednesday afternoon where all 121 educators voted unanimously to authorize a strike.

In January, the Flint Community Schools Board of Education voided the contract proposal between the UTF and school administrators, citing a $14 million deficit. Instead, the board approved its own counter-proposal, which would leave many teachers earning poverty wages of $38,000 a year.

Teachers confront massive challenges in a district where 70 percent of the children are growing up in poverty and many suffer from learning disabilities caused by the lead poisoning of the city’s water supply 10 years ago.

Despite the highly unusual and provocative action by the school board, for two months the UTF and its parent body, the Michigan Education Association, did nothing but call for further “negotiations” and conduct a toothless “vote of no confidence,” which had no impact on school board members or the powerful financial interests demanding the austerity measures.

UTF officials claim a strike date was set at Wednesday’s union meeting, but they have not revealed it to the public. “There is a date, but we’re not sure yet,” UTF President Karen Christian told the media. “I need the Flint School Board to give me a date to sit down and have a conversation.” After the strike vote, union officials immediately said the teachers would end their sickout and return to their classrooms Thursday.

For their part, school board officials hypocritically denounced the sickout for “hurting our scholars,” prompting an outpouring of anger from teachers and parents who are overwhelmingly sympathetic to the low-paid educators. After voting 7-0 Tuesday night to resume bargaining under the auspices of a state mediator, board members shed crocodile tears over the conditions facing teachers, claiming that “None of us” on the board “believes the teachers are making the proper compensation.”

Community members together with virtually the entire teaching staff of Flint—about 200 people—rallied at the site of the school board meeting Wednesday night. Years of concessions, the decimation of public education and expansion of for-profit charter schools in the city have enraged parents and educators alike. They carried picket signs, declaring, “Strike,” “Here we go again” and “No trust.” Passing motorists honked their horns in support.

Lining up to address the school board, teachers repeatedly denounced the “slap in the face” delivered by the Democratic Party-controlled board when it voided their tentative agreement. The proposal contained the first pay increases for many educators in 10 years. In 2013 and 2014, the UTF agreed to the layoffs of over 100 teachers, a wage freeze and concessions totaling about $13.5 million.

Joelle Jordan, a veteran teacher, explained the chaos of constant budget cuts in the district. Since being hired in 2006, she has been laid off “seven straight years out of my 18 years here.” Despite the stress and uncertainty, she said, “When I was recalled, I came back with eager anticipation to meet my students and to help them to grow and learn.”

She described being transferred to eight different elementary schools. “About the time I get to know the students and build relationships, I’m moved like a chess piece to another school. In a community of students that needs stability, because of the instability sometimes they experience in their lives, we do a disservice to our students and families.”

Joelle added, “When the pay cuts and freezes occurred in 2015, I had to come up with income to supplement this loss. I worked in retail. I would teach all day, leave at my contractual time, race to my retail store, and work until 11 PM at night sometimes. Then I’d get up the next morning and do it all over again. I did my best not to complain and showed up for my students to give them the educational experience they deserve.

“I am not alone in this. I’m sure there’s many of you,” she said, gesturing towards the audience, “who’ve worked second and third and fourth jobs. The majority of these teachers in this auditorium work other jobs and show up every day for the students in this district.”

Joelle and her colleague Beth Dumanois told the *World Socialist Web Site* that upwards of 70 percent of Flint teachers take on side jobs to live.

Nadia Rodriquez, a former Flint district educator, said, “The walkout is because teachers are not being heard by the board. They had taken concessions years ago with the promise that they would be made whole.”

Nadia explained that when she worked for the Flint Community Schools she was hired in on Step One but never moved from the bottom of the pay scale even after nine years of service. “You have teachers that have been working in this district for over 20 years that are making less than when they started because of inflation.

“One of the things that was shocking to me when I came to the

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district was that the water fountains were still off. So, if a child didn't come to school with bottled water, they wouldn't have access to water in the buildings. They weren't even turned on until my last year in the district.

"There's a number of obstacles that are going to come with children who have been exposed to lead. That's common knowledge. Many children in Flint need Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)," Nadia said, "but the supports were not available.

"The biggest problems are hyperactivity, difficulty paying attention, things of that nature," she continued. "A student may qualify for one-on-one support that would really help them, but we just don't have the staff." She emphasized the need for speech therapy and counseling, services which require a Master's degree. "Who's going to do that and come here making less than $40,000 a year?"

She added, "Now the district has even gone as far as to outsourcing those positions. So, you'll have kids receiving things like speech, but it's online in front of a computer. That's not an effective way to work with children. You have to be able to sit in front of them, to see their mouths.

"Because of the pay freezes for all this time, Flint teachers are some of the lowest paid teachers in the entire state. You're not going to be able to attract new teachers or retain Montessori teachers who are best equipped to help those students." She pointed out that teachers are instructing students who have gone a year or more without a certified teacher. "It could be a long-term substitute teacher, or it could be a different sub every day.

"Several of the five years I was there, I was across the hall from a classroom with no teacher. There would be days you'd see kids sitting outside on the floor in front of a locked door because there was just no one there to cover that classroom. The bell rang, the kids are there, and there's no plan because there's no one! That could be anywhere from 8 to 20 kids."

She described that she would buzz the office and ask if there was a teacher coming, and would be asked can you just take them? "Then I'm teaching in a one-room schoolhouse. Because now I've got first through sixth graders. What do I do with them? I don't have curriculum for them! Their needs are entirely different. If the student doesn't have the teacher, how do you make progress?"

Jamel Jones, a current Flint teacher, also addressed the effects of lead-laced water, the pandemic and poverty on the city's children. "We have the most conflictual children in our district. They can't go to other places because of behavior issues," she said, emphasizing, "The pay is not there for what we do."

John Guzowski, a music teacher, agreed saying, "I think the water crisis definitely had a part in that because a lot of kids were drinking lead-heavy water and for a long time. Because of the pandemic they were out of school and lost a lot of social learning over those couple years; we were virtual or partially virtual and in-person."

Asked about the Biden administration's allowing Federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to run out this September, John said, "It changed the way we educate for sure. We ended up getting like one-on-one devices, Chromebooks and iPads. I have only been here for one year, but a lot of the funding that we got from COVID paid for that."

Jamel added, "We need more parapros [paraprofessionals] to do more one-on-one because there are a lot of challenges that we deal with from day to day. I'm dealing with hunger issues. You know, the kids are not learning the way they should."

Jerry White, the vice presidential candidate of the Socialist Equality Party, issued a statement of solidarity with Flint teachers which was widely distributed at the board meeting. White called on "educators and workers across Michigan, the US and internationally to support their fight against poverty wages, overcrowded classrooms and relentless budget cutting."

The SEP candidate called attention to the Biden administration's ending of federal COVID-19 relief, despite the deepening fiscal crisis of schools, the mental health crisis and the persistence of learning loss. Both Democrats and Republicans, he emphasized, have joined together to allocate a record $886.3 billion for the US military, with tens of billions more funding the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

In addition to the ending of ESSER funds, Flint schools have been hard hit by unemployment, depopulation and the growth of poverty. The city, the birthplace of General Motors, has been utterly abandoned by the wildly profitable automaker, as well as the Democrats and Republicans. It is now the poorest city in the state, while its children are suffering lifelong effects from lead poisoning—at the hands of then-Republican Governor Rick Snyder and the Democratic Party establishment. In 2016, President Obama visited Flint, hypocritically proclaiming, "I've got your back"—cheap words that resulted in zero assistance to the hard-pressed residents.

After years of dwindling funds, the school district has been compelled to divert tax revenues to the banks rather than classrooms. Like several others across Michigan, the district appealed to the Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer for debt relief last year, to no avail. The state (controlled by the Democratic Party in both state houses as well), while posting a record $9 billion surplus, opted to instead divert billions of dollars to General Motors and other big businesses in the form of electric vehicle subsidies and other corporate welfare grants.

Teachers across the US and world are on the move against the massive attacks on public education, as resources are being diverted to war and corporate wealth. On Tuesday, Flint teachers were joined by educators also conducting a sickout in Los Angeles at the Citizens of the World Charter School, also fighting for increased pay and better working conditions. Teachers in Durham, North Carolina, have held a series of sickouts since January, when classified staff were told their pay increases were being rescinded. Potential teacher strikes loom in Minneapolis, Minnesota; Portland, Oregon and many other districts seeking to impose layoffs.

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