

One week after Flint teachers' sickout, school board refuses to pay contractual wages

Lawrence Porter, Nancy Hanover
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A week after their powerful one-day sickout and unanimous vote to strike, Flint teachers still have no resolution on their wages dispute with Flint Community Schools (FCS), nor are they on strike. Educators in the district have had their wages frozen since 2014 following years of concessionary contracts imposed by the district and agreed upon by the United Teachers of Flint (UTF) union.

On Wednesday, March 20, the school board met in advance of talks with the union on March 22, 25 and 26. In January, the district unilaterally reneged on the contract with the UTF, citing a \$14 million deficit. That agreement, initially signed in 2022, would have brought teachers to the salary step commensurate with their experience. It provided a single step increase in August 2023, and another in August 2024.

Despite the unheard-of reversal of the key provisions of a legally-binding contract by the district, the UTF failed to call a strike vote until forced to do so by the mass sickout on Wednesday, March 13. All 119 district teachers refused to report to work, closing every school in FCS. When the strike vote was held that afternoon, it was unanimous.

Continuing to prevent teachers from mobilizing their strength through strike action, the union then claimed the date was set but declined to divulge it. Now, the UTF is presenting the board's decision to hold talks as a "win." Michigan Education Association (MEA) director Bruce Jordan said, "It's at least a baby step in the right direction ... You don't get any settlement agreement without changing things. Do you know what I mean? They're tied."

While the board operates with impunity, the fate of Flint teachers—many of whom make as little as \$38,000 annually—has been relegated to a grievance procedure by the union, subject to state mediation. The union has

issued no statement pointing out the legal implications of FCS arbitrarily denying pay increases by citing budget deficits, followed by "negotiating" on an already-negotiated deal. Such measures could be used by districts everywhere to rescind already-inadequate pay schedules and push through deepening austerity.

Angry educators spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* at the school board meeting.

Kimberly Beach, a special ed teacher for 17 years, said she had not had a wage increase in 10 years. Referring to the sickout, Kimberly said, "something needed to be done. [We] needed to wake people up to realize how serious we are about this. We need to move forward and [get FCS to] agree to what they agreed to from the beginning."

Kimberly emphasized, "It's actually unprecedented they reneged on a contract that's already been signed."

Pointing to the enormous difficulties of working in special education in Flint after the mass lead poisoning of thousands of children, Kimberly stated, "We have a lot of kids that have behavioral issues and cognitive issues, and we're starting to see more and more kids who are eligible for special ed."

Melissa Koronka, an award-winning science teacher, told the *WSWS* that after nearly three decades on the job, she is only at step eight (out of 15) on the pay schedule. She commented, "We made concessions over the years and make less money than any of the other teachers. When this board took over, they got promised to make teachers whole.... when we had the tentative agreement, I was so hopeful, so positive and energized. Then when they voted it down, it just felt like a slap in the face."

Pointing to the FCS' abrupt reneging on the pay agreement, Melissa noted how teachers' paychecks were unexpected left completely short. "One thing I'm not clear on—there was already a contract that was signed in 2022. So, what happened

the day you were supposed to go in to your next step for you. In his remarks at the meeting, White stated, "What is the percentage increase in 2023?"

The battle of Flint teachers is just one front in a nationwide and indeed international war against public education by capitalist governments globally. Throughout Michigan and across the US, both the Democrats and Republicans are gutting education spending, imposing mass budget cuts, layoffs and austerity while diverting virtually all funding to the military and corporate handouts.

Significantly, last week students in New York, Oregon, and Washington walked out of their classrooms in protest against budget cuts and layoffs being planned in each district.

On Thursday, the nearby Ann Arbor school district began issuing layoff notices to staff, with plans to cut \$25 million from their 2024-25 budget. Laid off educators expect to learn their fate on April 30. On March 11, the Grand Rapids school board authorized \$1.6 million in cuts, including an undisclosed number of layoffs.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) vice-presidential candidate Perry White spoke to the Flint teachers and community members at the March 20 board meeting, emphasizing the broader context of their struggle. He stated,

Capitalism only promises war, poverty and dictatorship. The \$5.5 trillion controlled by American billionaires is more than seven times spent on K-12 education and 30 times what economist calculate is needed to end poverty in the US. The SEP demands billions for education, not bombs and missiles. We demand that the GM and other corporations, which have bled this city dry, be put under workers control and the ill-gotten fortunes of the billionaires expropriated and used for social need.

On Thursday, White also spoke at the school board meeting in Wayne-Westland, Michigan, which had an overflow audience of more than 100 educators, bus drivers, other school workers, parents and students. The school board entered the meeting with plans to rubber-stamp multimillion-dollar budget cuts which they have been discussing for months.

However, when an audience member exposed the fact that they were ramming the cuts through at that very meeting, without any review or input from the community, a crisis erupted and the majority of the school board maneuvered tactically to delay the cuts.

Backroom talks between the MEA and the big business politicians are not going to resolve the question. Everything depends on rank-and-file educators like yourselves taking the initiative, uniting with Flint teachers, uniting with Detroit teachers, and organizing a fight to defend the right to high quality public education, not private profit.

Towards the end of the meeting, the anger of the audience erupted once again after board member David Cox provocatively denounced district bus drivers for supposedly neglecting children. In his remarks, it was clear that Cox and the school board intend to resolve the district's budget crisis in part by privatizing the school bus system.

A further report and video from the meeting will be posted on the WSWS Sunday.



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