

Educators block budget-cutting measure at Wayne-Westland school board meeting in Detroit area

Our reporters
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Anger erupted at a local school board meeting in suburban Detroit last week when teachers, school bus drivers and other educational staff challenged the attempts of the Wayne-Westland Community Schools District school board to slash jobs and impose deep budget cuts. Protesting educators at the March 21 meeting forced the school board to postpone a vote to adopt its budget, which it attempted to rush through with as little public discussion as possible.

In January, 39 full-time and part-time school employees were laid off in the first of as many as 100 job cuts after the district suddenly announced a \$17.6 million budget deficit last December. School Superintendent John Dignan said the cuts were necessary to “right-size” the district and prevent it from being taken over by the state of Michigan.

In December, district officials announced they would investigate the privatization of student transportation services. Dignan later claimed the district had walked back from those plans after Michigan Education Association (MEA) Local 4 officials “expressed a desire to collaborate with the district to identify ways to control costs and increase consistency.”

For four months, the district has also postponed any talks with the MEA about a new contract for teachers to replace the one expiring in August. Teachers denounced this as a threat to blackmail them into similar wage and benefit concessions.

Like districts across Michigan and the US, the 9,800-student school district, located 30 miles west of Detroit, has lost students and state and local revenue due to the expansion of for-profit charter schools and the increasing number of “missing students” due to the impact of job cuts, poverty and homelessness.

As a result, Flint, Ann Arbor, Grand Rapids, Detroit and other Michigan school districts are implementing deep cuts. This is part of a national wave of austerity measures involving New York City, San Diego, Minneapolis, Seattle and many other school districts, which is provoking growing

opposition by educators, parents and students.

The school crisis has been worsened by the Biden administration’s decision to end the Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief (ESSER) program, which has provided nearly \$190 billion to US schools to assist with pandemic-related learning loss. While ESSER funds will run out this September, Biden just signed a \$1.2 trillion bipartisan government funding bill, which includes \$825 billion for the US military. The White House is seeking even more money to back Israel’s genocide in Gaza and to escalate the military confrontation with Russia and China.

Educators went into the March 21 school board meeting demanding answers about the budget shortfall and cuts. Several accused the district of mismanaging more than \$25 million in federal COVID relief money and wasting money on several new highly paid administrative positions.

In a letter to Dignan posted on the WWSCD Community Connection-Unofficial Facebook page, one educator said:

You’re looking at getting rid of support staff. The bus drivers, custodians, kitchen aides, maintenance staff, there’s so many more to name. These people **LIVE, WORK AND HAVE CHILDREN/GRANDCHILDREN** in the community. **THEY** help provide the per pupil state funding, and you want to take food and shelter away from them? **YOU** mishandled the funds, not the employees of Wayne-Westland.

It is noteworthy the district has retained the Detroit law firm, Miller, Canfield, Paddock and Stone as consultants on bond sales and other financial matters. The firm was deeply involved and cashed in from the Detroit bankruptcy—where public assets were sold off and city employees robbed of pensions to pay wealthy bondholders—along with the

investment scheme that led to the Flint water crisis.

As the public comment period of the meeting began, one community member called out the school board for trying to adopt the budget before anyone could study the details. “None of the public will have had time to digest the information. ... Do not consider adoption today, so that it can be thoroughly looked at before you make any rash decisions,” she said to applause.

Also addressing the meeting was Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for US Vice President. White said he was at the meeting to “support all of you who are taking a stand against layoffs, school privatization and overcrowded classrooms.” He said he was in Flint the day before, where teachers conducted a sickout strike on March 13 against the school board, which had reneged on promises to give them their first raise in 12 years. Teachers across the country and the world, he said, were facing the same conditions.

“The issue is not that there is no money,” White said. “The politicians in Lansing can find billions of dollars to give tax cuts to Ford and General Motors. When it comes to war, there is unlimited resources, including for the horrors that are going on in Gaza now.”

White added, “Biden and the Republicans are allowing COVID relief money to run out. ... There is plenty of money. The budget crisis facing cities like Flint, Wayne-Westland and thousands of school districts across the US is the product of capitalism, a system that subordinates everything from public health to public education to profit.”

Backroom talks between the MEA and the school board, White declared, will not resolve anything. “Everything depends on rank-and-file educators taking the initiative, uniting with teachers in Flint, Detroit and all over, and defending the right to high quality public education.” The Socialist Equality Party “insists that the needs of the working class must come first,” White concluded to the applause of educators.

After a short presentation by the district’s chief financial officer, several board members tried to rush through the adoption of the budget while others, fully aware that they were facing deep public opposition, called for a postponement. Board Trustee Mark Neal, who said he had once been a union negotiator before negotiating for management, was particularly provocative, demanding that there be no delay in implementing the cuts.

Later in the meeting, several other educators spoke to denounce the layoffs, the cutting of vital programs and the dragging out of negotiations for a new teachers’ contract.

White addressed the meeting again, stating that there are hundreds of school board meetings going on in America where workers were being presented similar charts and

numbers claiming there is no money for public education and workers’ jobs. He warned that the cutting off ESSER funds meant there were even deeper cuts coming, while stressing that the \$1 trillion being spent on war “is not an outside issue; these are your children. Why is there money for war, for tax cuts and bank bailouts? Why is it that the working class always has to pay when we live in a society where 84 billionaires have more wealth than half of the world’s population?”

White urged educators in Wayne-Westland to unite with their class brothers and sisters in Flint, Detroit and other cities to draw the line and fight for the next generation.

The mood of the audience grew more militant and determined after Board Trustee David Cox said it was not true that the board had rejected the layoff of school bus drivers and the outsourcing of student transportation. While claiming he supported good wages and benefits for teachers, Cox denounced school bus drivers for allegedly not showing up and leaving children behind.

After White declared, “Stop pitting teachers against school bus drivers,” several other workers denounced Cox’s statements, saying he had “no clue what we do,” that drivers often double up on their runs to pick up children and that teachers and bus drivers were united against the budget cutting. Unable to conceal his contempt for the workers interfering with the board’s budget cutting demands, Cox declared “This forum is not an effective way to do business” and disdainfully asked, “Is this what you teach your students?” After that, the meeting erupted in anger and workers stormed out, with one declaring, “Don’t poke the bear!”

The school board meeting in Wayne-Westland last week was a microcosm of what is now taking place across the US, as all funding is going to the military while critical social institutions like public education are starved of resources. Educators, parents and students must take their broadening anger and channel this in a revolutionary direction through the building of a socialist movement to unite workers internationally to put an end to war and rebuild society on the basis of social equality.



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