

Ann Arbor board approves layoffs and budget cuts over mass opposition

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The national onslaught on public education continued Thursday, this time in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where the local school board voted 4-3 to approve layoffs of teachers and support staff. They did so in the face of heated opposition from an overflow crowd of hundreds of parents, teachers and students, nearly 150 of whom signed up to give public comments. The meeting, which started at 7pm, lasted until midnight.

The Ann Arbor Public Schools (AAPS) board recently announced a “budget shortfall” of some \$25 million for the 2024-25 school year, partly occasioned by an “accounting error” regarding a \$14 million retirement liability. The district has been given an April 15 deadline for submitting a “corrective action plan” to the state treasurer or face the possibility of state oversight.

Like every school district in the country, AAPS is also impacted by the ending of the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) federal COVID money, of which Michigan received \$3.7 billion. The Citizens Research Council of Michigan (CRC), a private non-partisan research organization, estimated that statewide up to 5,100 full-time teachers’ jobs could be cut, including 142 teachers in Ann Arbor.

Above all, the cuts emerge from a far-reaching bipartisan restructuring of federal government spending. The most recent US budget appropriated a record \$886.3 billion for the military, amounting to more than half of the government’s entire discretionary funding.

According to a recent report by K-12 Dive, the federal budget includes \$500 million less for the Department of Education as compared to the 2023 fiscal year and represents the first major cut to education since 2015.

With ever-increasing spending on the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, the financing of Israel’s genocide in Gaza, the active extension of war in the Middle East to include Iran and Syria and the global preparations for war against China, the current round of cuts in education will only increase.

At Thursday’s meeting, a World Socialist Web Site campaign team distributed a critique of the AAPS attacks and its connection to war and broader attacks on workers, and spoke to teachers and parents at the meeting. Many teachers expressed their eagerness to fight against any cuts. A teacher with ten years of experience noted that morale among AAPS teachers had been steadily eroding over the past decade, as teachers have made greater and greater sacrifices for their students—only to have deeper cuts imposed upon them. “And we’re supposed to be one of the better-off school districts in the state. This is probably even worse in most other districts around the state. And we did nothing to cause this mess!”

The fight to defend jobs in AAPS will bring teachers face-to-face with the leadership of their own union, the Ann Arbor Education Association. At the board meeting on Thursday, the union organized the teachers to chant: “We are teachers; we are not the problem.” There was no mention of the crisis engulfing almost every district across the country, including the wealthier ones like Ann Arbor. Nor was anything said about the bipartisan attack on education, nor more immediately to genocide and war escalation, where hundreds of billions are made available while workers are told they must accept cuts.

Michigan is a key battleground state for the Democratic Party in the November elections, and the union bureaucracies are playing a key role in paralyzing workers struggles. The fight to defend jobs extends way

beyond the school districts, with hundreds of layoffs already implemented in the auto industry, of which Michigan remains the center.

A middle school teacher told the WWSWS, “Most of the people on the school board are wealthy or using it as a springboard to get more money elsewhere. I don’t think they have any genuine interest in making schools equitable or thriving places for education.”

Educators and parents in Ann Arbor have natural allies in other Michigan school districts. Flint, Ann Arbor, Grand Rapids, Detroit and other Michigan school districts are all implementing deep cuts, including school closures. Last month in Wayne-Westland, teachers, school bus drivers and other educational staff forced the school board to postpone a vote to adopt its budget.

The middle school teacher continued: “I am aware of some of the struggles facing teachers across the state. After seeing our comrades in Ypsilanti and Flint endure this, we have to start drawing a line in the sand!”

The educator also noted the cynical role local Democrats are beginning to play among the teachers. “Some local representatives came around our meeting last night to offer paid campaigning positions. These people won’t even defend us with any real substance, but they want us to campaign for their re-election?”

The same teacher also discussed the connections between the funding of militarism and genocide abroad, and the attacks on workers at home. “We’re an empire in decline, and the rich are using the wars and the cuts to get as much money as they can to build their own rescue boats. They don’t care if they sink everyone else.”

On January 17, Ann Arbor teachers and parents were able to get a resolution passed by the school board calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, despite political pressure. “There has been a consistent effort to intimidate Palestinian teachers and any teachers that spoke out against the genocide by community groups that are extraordinarily antagonistic to pro-Palestinian sentiment being raised. We could see that there were possible cuts coming last semester to some extent, and the threat of layoffs was used as a mechanism to create a chill against speaking out in defense of the Palestinians, or of our Palestinian colleagues here in Ann Arbor. And I think we can see efforts where the rich or right wing forces use identity to try and divide

us, and pit us against each other.”

The school board has scheduled a virtual town hall meeting for Monday, April 15 at 6:30 PM, where another update will be presented. That will be followed by a community meeting for the general public on Tuesday, April 16 at Huron High School, with meetings for AAPS staff and secondary staff on Wednesday, April 17 at Pioneer. It concludes with another community meeting at Skyline High School Thursday, April 18. Ann Arbor Public Schools (AAPS) has scheduled community forums next week at the three high schools to take “input” from educators and families on what programs and services to target.

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee, part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, is fighting to unite educators and parents with other sections of workers in struggle. Any effective defense of jobs requires complete political independence from the Democrats and Republicans and a socialist perspective, to combat the source of wars and attacks on jobs and living standards: the capitalist system.

We urge interested educators, parents and youth to sign up for the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee.



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