

“Most teachers can’t afford to live here now”

Anger mounts as Ann Arbor Public School board prepares cuts

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At meetings across the district this past week, Ann Arbor Public School (AAPS) teachers, staff, students and community members spoke angrily against plans to lay off educators and other critical staff to address a \$25 million budget shortfall.

The fiscal crisis is primarily the product of the expiration of the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER), compounded by a drop in enrollment and a purported “accounting error.”

Last week, the AAPS Board of Education issued pink slips to members of the Association of School and Community Service Administrators (ASCA) and voted at an April 11 meeting to carry out layoffs across the district. The overflow meeting was marked with opposition; over 150 people submitted public comments in protest. Typical of the meeting were the comments of one para-educator, who spoke through tears, “It’s unbelievable what they’re doing. Why are students and teachers collateral damage caused by a mistake they didn’t make?”

The Board was clearly taken aback by the passionate defense of jobs and education. It began to verbally walk back from its demand for immediate layoffs among student-facing staff which it previously said were inevitable. Nonetheless, it submitted its “corrective budget plan” to the State of Michigan on April 15, pledging to achieve a 5 percent “fund balance.”

The Board also hurriedly announced plans to sell an undisclosed building for “several millions.” Additionally, financial consultant Marious Demetrious said an unstated number of positions in the central office would be eliminated. He claimed this would save \$4.5 million, while a possible \$1 million could be netted from moving existing employees into state categorical or federal grants.

An AAPS eleventh grade student told the WSWs, “I see a threat to all the amazing programs that schools have,

and just not being able to allocate teachers to those programs. It really disadvantages a lot of students. I think it’s important to show that this issue really affects everybody, not just a certain district.”

A librarian in the district was further angered by the ploy of asking for educators’ “input” on cuts. “They’re having these meetings to make it look like they want input from teachers and the community. But I don’t know that I trust how much that really matters to them. Their track record shows that we can’t trust them, so why would we trust them now?”

Her husband added sarcastically, “They were having us write on big pieces of paper, ‘Give us your ideas!’ And you’re supposed to sit together and talk.” Another angry teacher called the meeting “a waste of my time” and “verbal vomit.” She demanded to know, “Where’s the money going?”

The librarian showed the WSWs reporter photos of her school. “This is a classroom for support staff. It used to be a custodian’s closet because we don’t have enough room.’ The nameplate of ‘Custodian’s Closet’ was still on the wall, yet the door had children’s artwork on it and the open door revealed a classroom inside. ‘To be shoved in a janitor’s closet without running water is very discouraging.’”

“We don’t have a kitchen in our teacher’s lounge anymore because the kitchen is being used as space for support staff.”

She continued to thumb through her pictures, pointing out, “This used to be one of the adult bathrooms, which we now have to use as a bathroom for special needs kids because they’re also shoved into a room that doesn’t have a bathroom. That leaves three total toilets for all of the staff.”

Showing another photo, she added, “They had to use

this former storage space, and that's where the instrumental music meets. And that 'classroom' is about 85 degrees (29 Celsius) on a regular basis."

"We have a theater teacher who has to teach right off the stage that is in the cafeteria. She doesn't have a classroom."

Her husband spoke on the stark contrast between his wife and her colleagues' working conditions and pay and those of administrators: "It's top-heavy. It's the equivalent of CEOs. They've made themselves CEOs in the administration. And they think they're what makes this a great school district. And then that BS they try to pull, making it seem like it was hiring teachers and giving them a raise [as if, that's the problem]?"

"They've missed all these steps over the years. Most teachers can't live here now," he continued. "Teachers basically gave them a bunch of money 15 years ago. They bailed the district out by taking a 3 percent pay cut, and the district never made up for it."

He concluded, "I think the teacher's union was pretty lax on not getting right on this and fixing this. It's embarrassing."

Other teachers spoke about the Board's lack of transparency and their constant refrain of "we're working on it." Another parent said the Board should open its accounts, adding, "Not just the information [they're] putting out, but the information you use to make the decisions."

The Board has worked closely with the Ann Arbor Education Association (AAEA) bureaucracy to ram through the cuts and suppress protests. The AAEA, following the lead of the Michigan Education Association and the National Education Association, to which it is affiliated, has pledged cooperation with the Board and failed to threaten any action against layoffs or attacks on critical educational programs in the district.

Instead of mobilizing the working class in defense of public education, the AAEA is advising the Board on "helpful" cost-saving measures, like limiting P-Card purchases and travel costs, while promoting the do-nothing slogan to teachers, "I'm not the problem."

This has infuriated educators. A para educator told the WSWS, "The union isn't doing anything, they don't answer any of our questions. We don't feel the slightest bit supported! Percy Brown [president of the AAEA-Para educators] refuses to communicate with us, he tells us he is working behind the scenes! What are we paying dues for? We feel completely unsupported."

Another educator said the AAEA has failed to provide

information to its members or discuss the pending cuts. She pointed to the lack of representation from the AAEA while so-called leaders reply to rank-and-file criticism with, "Oh, you think I don't do anything, but it's because I'm in the back, I do things behind the scenes." She retorted: "No, you don't!"

Members of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee (MERFC) pointed to the long role of the MEA and the American Federation of Teachers in forcing through concessions and layoffs. MERFC distributed a call-to-action among Ann Arbor teachers and staff at the community meetings, titled **"No layoffs! No budget cuts! Mobilize the working class to defend public education in Ann Arbor and across Michigan!"**

The statement emphasized the bipartisan character of the years-long assault on public education and emphasized that the fight in Michigan is connected to struggles nationally and internationally and had to be conducted independently of the union apparatus, the Democrats and the Republicans.

It urged Ann Arbor teachers to join the MERFC and warned, "A far-reaching bipartisan restructuring of federal government spending is underway, prioritizing war and slashing social 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. The bipartisan budget signed last month by Biden includes his demand for a \$500 million cut in the Department of Education budget."

These statements were warmly received, with workers also drawing political conclusions. One parent emphasized, "Maintaining them [social programs] always costs social mobilization; it's always an ongoing thing. Punctuated here and there by strikes to maintain public hospitals and universities."

Another added, "If there's a large enough working-class voice, that this is important. Right now, we're getting short shrift of what's going on. Things crumble when we get the shrift."



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