

Ann Arbor school board votes for draconian budget cuts

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On Tuesday evening, the Ann Arbor, Michigan Board of Education voted to cut \$20 million from its school budget next year by eliminating 141 staffing positions, including 91 teachers, and gutting elementary school world languages, music and other critical programs.

The 6-1 vote by the Democratic Party-controlled school board followed weeks of angry public meetings and protests by hundreds of educators, parents and students against the planned cuts. Layoff notices are expected to go out as early as this week.

The district blames the cuts on falling enrollment and a supposed “accounting error,” which allegedly counted a one-time infusion of state pension funding as future revenue. Over the last few years, however, the loss of per pupil state funding and higher expenses due to inflation have been largely covered over by tens of millions of dollars in federal COVID-19 relief money.

The Biden administration’s decision to allow the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) program to expire—despite the ongoing pandemic and continued impact on public schools—has created a “fiscal cliff” for school districts around the country. A recent CNN report stated the ending of the program could lead to the elimination of the jobs of 384,000 educators over the next two years in the US, with estimates of 5,100 job cuts in Michigan alone.

Far from organizing opposition to the brutal cuts, the Ann Arbor Education Association agreed to voluntary buyouts that would pay teachers with 10 years or more experience up to \$25,000 to resign. From the beginning, officials from the AAEA and its parent organization, the Michigan Education Association, have offered their collaboration “in using attrition and retirements to continue reducing staff and right-size the district,” as AAEA President Fred Klein declared outside an earlier school board meeting.

The publication *Bridge Michigan* reports that the Ann Arbor cuts include:

- **\$14.7 million** through reducing total staff by 6 percent, including teachers, paraprofessionals, support staff and others.
- **\$1.2 million** by shifting a science, technology, engineering, arts and math elementary program into the specials schedule
- **\$400,000** by eliminating world language programs in elementary schools that are not connected to an International Baccalaureate program
- **\$224,000** by reducing co-teachers in middle and high school band and orchestra programs
- **\$525,000 annually** by reducing substitute costs and two coordinator positions in two elementary International Baccalaureate programs
- **\$150,000** by eliminating a virtual elementary school that has eight students
- **\$520,000** a year plus repair costs by closing middle school pools except for a city-run pool inside a middle school

The district is looking for additional cuts through further talks with the AAEA. It is not clear whether paraprofessionals, also members of the AAEA, will be subject to a pay cut of as much as \$3 an hour, a proposal

that has been previously floated.

“I’m outraged at the hypocrisy of the district,” one of the nine elementary school world languages teachers being laid off told the WSWs. “They say they want children to learn world cultures and then they cut the money.”

During Tuesday’s board meeting, more than 200 speakers denounced the planned cuts in comments school authorities arrogantly restricted to one minute each.

Hao Huang, a mother of a 9th grader said, “Today, I feel an urge to speak out no matter how broken my English is. I am so shocked to hear the solutions our board has come up with was to eliminate the languages at elementary level and music program, and others that our school district provides. Teaching languages at the elementary level is so crucial to get our kids to be more prepared in an increasingly interconnected world.”

Joaquín, a senior in high school, spoke powerfully in defense of the music program: “I can confidently say that it has changed my life. As I’ve changed from child to young adult, I have probably had the best support under music of all communities that I’ve been a part. I have built memories, friends and developed my basic principles under these programs. I want future generations to have the same welcoming experience available to them.”

A former student said, “Ladies and gentlemen of the board, I have been away from the Ann Arbor Public Schools for just about a year now. What in the hell have you done while I’ve been gone? I am appalled at present that we are forced to actively consider budget cuts this drastic... I am appalled that our leadership are actively and frankly considering laying off 141 Ann Arbor Public School teachers and staff members. Let me tell you, we are nothing without our teachers and staff.”

One parent opposing the cutting of positions and salaries of paraprofessionals wrote to express her appreciation for making her special-needs son flourish. “The most vulnerable students will suffer the most. These programs are essential for a well-rounded education.”

A parent wrote to the board about Rachel Goldberg, the librarian at Pioneer High School whose full-time position is being cut: “Her one-on-one time with our six-year-old-son has helped him to become human. This has been crucial to develop his love of reading. Without her it would be impossible to give such personal support.”

Emma, an after school childcare worker, told the WSWs that she supported a strike by all educators to fight the layoffs and budget cuts. “I don’t think there is no money for education, it’s that they’re not making money for public education...War makes profit and that’s what they’re after. They’re putting profit over people.”

She praised the University of California academic workers for striking to defend the rights of their students to protest the Israeli genocide in Gaza without police repression. “As workers, we are connected to every other struggle ... and this is affecting their students. All power to them, I support their struggle.”

Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for US vice

president, also spoke. Addressing himself to the audience, he said “everyone had spoken passionately about the impact that cuts to language, music and other life-changing courses would have. But the school board does not speak for the interests of working and middle-class families. It speaks for powerful corporate and financial interests that are gutting public education across the country.”

He urged rank-and-file educators to respond to the board’s vote with their own vote for “immediate strike action to defend every job and every program.” Such bold action, he said would win widespread popular support, including from the hundreds of thousands of educators facing impending job cuts.

The priority of the Democrats and Republicans was not school funding, but “war funding,” White said, pointing to the \$95 billion bipartisan war funding bill signed by Biden last month to send more weapons to Israel for its genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, and for the escalating wars against Russia and China.

As his microphone was turned off, White urged Ann Arbor teachers to follow the example of the 50,000 University of California academic workers who voted overwhelming to strike to defend their students against the police repression of the anti-genocide campus protests.

The significance of these statements were borne out less than eight hours later when the University of Michigan and Michigan State Police violently cleared the out the Ann Arbor Gaza Solidarity encampment on the UM campus, just a few miles from away from where the school board meeting was being held.

Before the meeting, supporters of the SEP candidate, distributed White’s message to Ann Arbor educators. It read:

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After months of so-called “public input,” the school board is set to vote tonight on its draconian budget proposal, which would eliminate 141 critical staff members, including 94 teachers—a full 6 percent of the total.

If the board succeeds in pushing through its budget, class sizes will increase and programs throughout the district will be severely undermined, from World Languages, music, swimming, International Baccalaureate, Virtual Academy and more.

Teachers, staff, parents and students cannot and must not accept this. If the budget cuts are ratified, rank-and-file educators should organize their own vote for immediate strike action to defend every job and program.

The response of Ann Arbor Education Association officials, to recommend that educators voluntarily quit or take early retirements, is not a perspective to fight, but capitulation.

A word of warning is necessary: next year’s \$20 million in cuts will be just the beginning.

The crisis in Ann Arbor is not the result of an “accounting error.” It is part of a relentless attack on public education being spearheaded by Democrats and Republicans across the United States.

According to CNN, an estimated 384,000 full time educators’ jobs will be axed nationwide over the next two years, as the Biden administration allows federal COVID-19 school funding to expire. This will only accelerate the loss of students, which, in turn, will be utilized to cut more funding and divert even more public resources to for-profit charter schools. In some Chicago neighborhoods, for example, nearly half of 16- to 24-year-olds are neither working nor in school.

Public education is no longer a priority—war funding is. While Biden has allowed Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to lapse, the administration has allocated

nearly \$1 trillion for military spending this year. At the same time as big business politicians tell us there is no money for schools, Biden signed a bipartisan funding bill of another \$95 billion last month, including sending more weapons to Israel to slaughter the Palestinians and to Ukraine for the US/NATO proxy war against Russia.

The cost of a single F-16 jet fighter manufactured by Lockheed Martin is \$63 million, enough to eliminate Ann Arbor’s school deficit nearly three times over! The truth is that the American ruling class has nothing to offer young people but a future of war and death—and, from their perspective, the less educated youth are, the better.

But educators are taking a stand to defend themselves and the students they teach. This morning, University of California graduate students and other academic workers began a strike to demand a halt to the arrest of students protesting the US-backed genocide in Gaza. The UC administrators, backed by Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom and the Biden administration, warned that the strike is setting a “dangerous precedent” because it would “introduce non-labor issues into labor agreements,” and impact “public employers” more widely.

University administrators who are threatening striking educators with legal action have the audacity to claim that educators have no right to strike over political issues, including the beating and arrest of their own students for exercising their free speech rights. But this has not stopped the UC heads from “taking political action” to send in police with riot gear to suppress campus protests.

In the face of this attack, the educators’ own union, the United Auto Workers, has limited the strike to a single campus, although academic workers voted overwhelmingly for a strike by all 50,000 UC workers at all 10 campuses. The reason for this is clear: UAW President Shawn Fain and the UAW apparatus are backing Biden’s reelection and are doing everything they can to prevent a political challenge by the working class to “Genocide Joe” and the corporate and financial establishment that both he and Trump serve.

As the founder of scientific socialism, Karl Marx, said a long time ago, “every class struggle is a political struggle.” If the interests of educators and the next generation are to take priority over the giant corporations that profit from imperialist wars, then the working class must use its immense social power to reorganize society based on human needs, not private profit.

In conclusion, I urge you to support the election campaign of SEP presidential candidate Joseph Kishore and I, and to sign our petition to put us on the Michigan ballot. I also urge you to contact the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee, which is part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, to unite with workers across the state, the US and worldwide to defend the right to high quality public education to all.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact