

School worker layoffs loom as dozens of teacher contracts expire in Detroit and across Michigan

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Are you a Michigan educator? Tell us what is happening in your school district by filling out the form at the end of this article.

Unprecedented cuts to public education are taking effect across Michigan, largely due to the ending of the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) program. ESSER had provided Michigan's hard-pressed schools with \$6 billion in temporary assistance.

The Biden administration's decision to allow the COVID school funding program to expire this September is expected to cost as many as 5,100 teachers their jobs in Michigan and more than 380,000 nationally. In addition, the drying up of ESSER funds is already leading to the destruction of many academic programs and services.

The first wave of cuts coincides with the expiration of labor agreements covering teachers and other school workers in nearly 30 Michigan districts on June 30. These include Eaton-Rapids, Utica Community Schools, Berkley, Wayne-Westland, Ferndale, Clarenceville, Plymouth-Canton, Northville, Garden City, Armada, Pontiac, Flushing, Southfield, Fowlerville, Kalkaska, Grosse Pointe and the Detroit Public School Community District (DPSCD).

Struggles have begun in many Michigan districts against this fundamental assault on the right to public education. In Ann Arbor, educators, teachers and students carried out weeks of militant protests, making passionate statements to the Board of Education on the urgency of defending teachers' jobs and academic programs. Nevertheless, the district—with the collusion of the Ann Arbor Education Association (AAEA)—approved the elimination of 141 staff positions, including 94 teachers, on May 20. Far from opposing this, AAEA officials offered their assistance in “right-sizing” the district by recommending that educators take buyouts.

After months of protests, Flint teachers shut the district down in a one-day sickout on March 13, forcing the district to partially backtrack on de facto pay cuts. In Wayne-Westland, teachers have been battling cuts throughout 2023-24. The district has reported a \$30 million budget shortfall and urged \$17 million in cuts for 2024-25. Grosse Pointe teachers, parents, and students rallied and protested similar cuts for months last year.

Despite ESSER cuts affecting every district and expiring contracts statewide, the Michigan Education Association (MEA) and the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) have not lifted a

finger to organize a unified fight to defend jobs. Just the opposite. They are actively blocking the urgently required struggle.

First, the union apparatuses have erected a wall of silence around the negotiations. On Facebook, one Wayne-Westland teacher said, “Everything is top secret until negotiations are done.” A teacher in Flushing said, “I have no clue of any details.” “It's like driving a car with square wheels,” said a Fowlerville teacher of contract talks.

Detroit teachers were not only entirely shut out of the negotiations, but instructed at union meetings that their input was not requested. Last year over 300 positions were cut “proactively,” before the ESSER fiscal cliff, compounding the struggles of educators working in the poorest big city in America. Yet, talks are proceeding without a union pledge to restore jobs. This is not a surprise since the DFT bureaucracy not only acquiesced to the layoffs, but it presented the elimination of the jobs of paraprofessionals *not* affiliated with the AFT (compared to those who were) as a “victory.”

While Detroit teachers are being kept in the dark on talks, DFT President Lokia Wilson-Lumpkins enthused at the personal appearance of Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) Superintendent Nikolai Vitti in negotiations. She congratulated herself for inviting him, telling the local media, “And let me tell you, it worked. We were able to make some decisions that didn't need an ‘Oh, wait, let me see.’”

While these “decisions” are not being divulged to union members, the bureaucracy has made clear in several communications with teachers that a key priority is restoring payroll deduction for dues. In other words, they are eager to keep the union hierarchy's hefty paychecks safe.

This points to the symbiotic and corrupt relationship of the union bureaucracy with the Democratic Party, which has nothing to do with defending teachers and everything to do with protecting the highly-paid apparatus. Last year Democrats overturned a state “right to work” law, permitting unions to bargain for the resumption of automatic payroll deduction for dues.

With teacher union membership in the state collapsing over years, the MEA and AFT are laser-focused on increasing that income stream. The legal measure that the Democrats pushed through is a quid pro quo for the unions' hundreds of millions of dollars of campaign funding contributions and avid support for the

Democrats at all levels. The union apparatus, meanwhile, turns a blind eye to the Democrats' policy of eviscerating public education in bipartisan agreement with the Republicans.

Three additional bargaining issues being discussed according to various sources include the Detroit Public Schools Community District's demand for a 10-minute extension of the workday with no increase in pay; Vitti's proposal to lure specialty educators with additional one-time bonuses; and a decision to arbitrarily deny the step increases (a 33 percent pay bump) due this year to teachers hired during the height of COVID deaths at a \$51,000 base rate.

These measures recall the concessionary contract agreed to by the union last year which left layoffs untouched, resulted in higher class sizes, more responsibilities loaded on educators, and a lack of school counselors, nurses and paraprofessionals.

When asked about major concerns this contract year, one ASD (autism spectrum disorder) teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site* that critical limits on class sizes are not being adhered to. An ESL (English as a second language) teacher pointed to overloaded classes, saying her class increased by 10 students, with no additional compensation.

Depressed wage levels after years of concessions are a central concern for most teachers. Last year's contract in DPSCD, which claimed to be a "generous" one, failed to make teachers whole after decades of previous cuts and agreed to a divide-and-conquer bonus strategy. Special education teachers received \$15,000, while most educators got between \$1,000 and \$4,000—all of which was a one-time taxable sum, not rolled into base pay or counted toward pensions.

These cuts take place as children are barely getting an education and social spending is being axed in favor of war spending. According to *Chalkbeat*, "In the spring of 2023, 24.7% of students read three levels below their grade while only 13.5% of students could read at grade level" in Detroit. Michigan children's education ranks 41st in the nation, according to the 2024 Kids Count report, which also looks at a composite index of child well-being and ranks Michigan at the bottom fifth for most indicators.

The MEA and DFT's stonewalling of educators is designed to prevent any possible strikes against the cuts, as broke out in Flint or West Virginia and across the country earlier. The unions are working overtime to keep districts isolated, concealing the depth and breadth of the assault on education and preventing any strikes in the run-up to the November 5 US presidential elections.

The union apparatus is singularly focused on preventing embarrassment to the Democratic Party establishment, which has prioritized war over social spending. Biden has allowed the ESSER program to expire but has found more than \$1 trillion for ever-expanding wars of global hegemony.

As has become routine, the pro-capitalist AFT and NEA bureaucrats are presiding over new—and even more existential—cuts to public education to keep their "seat at the table." These millions of dollars cut from education and social needs will be used to fuel the genocide in Gaza, the proxy war against Russia and the military confrontation with China.

Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for vice president in the 2024 elections, addressed teachers fighting budget

cuts at meetings in Wayne-Westland, Flint and Ann Arbor. In a statement to Ann Arbor teachers, he emphasized:

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...

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 me, 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 for all.

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