

# Michigan teachers join rank-and-file campaign to defend immigrants and public education

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At an online meeting Sunday, February 16, Michigan teachers and supporters voted to endorse a statement issued by the Educators Rank-and-File Committee (ERFC) titled “Hands off immigrant children and parents! Build the Educators Rank-and-File Committee to defend democratic rights.”

Throughout the intense and lively meeting, teachers expressed their anger over the Trump administration’s attacks on education, democratic rights, and immigrants and their determination to fight.

Chairing the meeting, Nancy Hanover explained the unique character of the Educators Rank-and-File Committee as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. “This organization unites workers both across industries and across borders,” she said. “We’re not a pressure group. We’re not organizing to beg the unions to take action or to pressure the Democrats to fight. We base ourselves on the fundamental class power of workers. This is the only force that is both willing and able to stop the rampage against education, jobs, fascism, and war.”

Phyllis Steele, an elementary school teacher in Detroit, introduced the ERFC statement. She characterized Trump’s claim that the US is being “invaded” by immigrants as a flagrant lie, designed to provide a legal pretext for his attacks on immigrants. She discussed the ending of any restrictions on school raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents and the plans to overturn the US Supreme Court ruling in the 1982 landmark *Plyler v. Doe* case, which upheld the right of all children to free public education, regardless of immigration status.

“Teachers are immensely proud that we serve all children, regardless of immigration status,” Steele said, explaining that “Trump’s agenda includes mass deportations, overturning birthright citizenship, and using the military to round up immigrants, even transporting them to Guantanamo Bay. He has also threatened the so-called ‘enemy within,’ with rhetoric designed to silence us and our freedom of speech, and justify authoritarian rule.”

“This assault is the spearhead on the rights of the entire working class, both native and foreign-born,” Steele pointed out. But the outcome of this struggle will not be decided by lawsuits, she cautioned. “What will determine it will be the struggle of the working class.” She called on attendees to build the ERFC and to reach out to all sections of the working class.

Speaking first in the discussion, a Detroit Public School Community District (DPSCD) teacher Alyssa said some of her coworkers felt they’ve “already lost the war.” She said, “I’ve had to remind them that we’ve just begun the fight. We haven’t lost anything. A lot of us are walking around like we don’t still have our rights. We still have all of our constitutionally protected rights.

“We still have the right to fight. And we have to fight for our children.

We are their first line of defense. Teachers always have been. Once we get involved and we start to inform not only our neighbors, but their parents too, because they are part of the working class, we can get this moving. We can fight back.”

Charles, a Metro Detroit teacher, responded, “I 100 percent agree about our Constitutional rights [to fight]. I appreciate someone saying that. I think someone brought that same issue up when it came to Palestine.” He concluded, “It’s on people like me, who has a better life [than Palestinians] to work for these kids.”

Michael, a supporter of the committee, then asked what teachers can do if ICE comes to their classroom. Hanover responded, stating, “As individuals, we are limited. Workers, students and families must use every legal right at their disposal. But the Trump government is violating a whole series of laws in order to carry through these attacks, including *posse comitatus*. They are targeting sanctuary cities, sending in ICE agents to target students directly if localities refuse to cooperate.

“For all these reasons and more, the issue is mobilizing the working class as a class. This raises the role of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), the largest union in America. They are in a position to launch a national strike against these illegal and vicious attacks on democratic rights. Instead, they have created a fraudulent ‘Department of those who working for a living’ as a cover for doing nothing but supporting Democratic politicians.

“We have to educate, we need to build committees, and we need to mobilize the power of the working class in mass action.”

The next educator, a Detroit middle school teacher, explained what educators confront when teaching immigrant children. “I teach English as a second language, so most of my students have just moved to this country within the past year. One concrete educational task I did was printing out the information on what to say if you are confronted by an ICE officer. Whatever we can do to make it harder for ICE to do their job, we should. There are very real fears out there. There are a lot of families who are leaving and going back to their areas that might seem less targeted.”

Carolyn, a high school teacher, asked how to deal with public consciousness. She said she was very concerned that many people no longer have children in schools, and they’ve been convinced that teachers “have a nefarious agenda to brainwash children rather than teach English and math.” She asked, “How can we combat this fascist agenda that public schools are garbage, and we need to privatize everything?”

Mo, a high school teacher in Detroit, explained that the crisis in education was the result of bipartisan attacks. “We have to point in the right direction. The attacks on the rights of immigrant workers and children were already ongoing under the Democratic administration of Biden-Harris. Biden also deported a lot of immigrants and laid the basis for these vicious policies. In fact, during his term, he failed to overturn

any of the policies that Trump put in his first term in office.”

“To break people free of the populist appeal of Trump means explaining the nature of capitalism. It means building class consciousness. We are fighting a government run by billionaires, but we are members of the productive class. We are defending the right of workers to live wherever they want, to culture and education, to all our rights and freedoms,” she told the group.

Jerry White, the labor editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, remarked that similar discussions are occurring around the world as Trump-like governments seek to scapegoat immigrants for the systematic destruction of social programs and the immense growth of social inequality.

Referring to a prior point, White said, “The sister asked about the question of public support for educators. That’s a dynamic issue. We should recall the wave of strikes in 2018-19 in the ‘Red’ states, West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona. These mass strikes were initiated not with the authority of the AFT or NEA but by teachers themselves. They arose out of immense frustration at the union bureaucracy’s constant bowing to budget cuts. They developed from local to statewide strikes. It was a burgeoning national movement and earned mass support across the US. Everyone knows that teachers play an immense role in the lives of their children and communities.

“This is why the development of this rank-and-file committee is so crucial. We are here to assist in organizing the opposition of educators. [AFT president] Randi Weingarten is saying this is all just a bad dream; we’ll use the courts, and we will elect Democrats. But you can’t have a democracy in a society dominated by an oligarchy. Both the Democrats and Republicans are hostile to an educated and above all, politically class-conscious populace.

“There will be immense opposition, but that opposition needs a leadership. Otherwise, educators are left just simply to their own individual actions, no matter how morally determined they are and courageous they are.

“We can’t stop ICE raids and the attack on public education as individuals. The educators have to educate each other, and they have to educate the working class population, which is the majority of the people. The right to public education, the right to healthcare, and the very existence of democracy are bound up with building a very powerful movement of the working class.

“Our interests are the interests of the vast majority of society. We aren’t going to have the resources for education and other social needs without the expropriation of the ill-gotten gains of the oligarchs.” He noted that the precedent was the Civil War when the power of the slavocracy could only be broken through the expropriation of the slaves and their liberation.

“The development of the class struggle will change the dynamic, but it needs leadership, and that is what the committees, affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, are for.”

Agreeing with the last speakers, Charles said, “These points about class organization are very valid. People have gotten the idea that they need to vote for the Democrats or that Kamala Harris lost due to racism. That’s not the main issue; instead, they should be pointing out that the Democrats were committing genocide. I agree about [building] a working class movement. We are all being oppressed by the state, that’s the point.” He encouraged the group, “Keep having those conversations at work and emphasizing the working class struggle!”

Larry Porter, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party, noted, “We welcome the discussion because it is, in fact, only through a genuine discussion can you really come to an understanding of our tasks and challenges.” He noted that 30 percent of the population of Dearborn voted for Trump under the illusion that this was a way to oppose the genocide in Gaza. “They were lied to. Now it becomes clear, Trump aims to seize Gaza and complete its ethnic cleansing.” He underscored the role of rank-

and-file committees to tell the truth and warn the working class.

At this point, Alyssa issued a warning about the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) union leadership. “Yes, I just wanted to say that [AFT President] Randi Weingarten is going to betray us. It’s not the first time. She always betrays us. The union will not get out there and fight. Like you said earlier, she could have called, or still can call, a strike. She can do that—but won’t.”

Referring to the mass sickouts which Detroit teachers staged in 2015 against dangerous and dilapidated school buildings, the high school educator said, “We did it by ourselves with no help from the union. The only thing that Weingarten did was to make up false claims and try to shut us down. We cannot trust her. She is a part of the problem. She is a multi-millionaire. She makes half a million dollars a year, last time I checked. She is a part of the DNC [Democratic National Committee].”

She concluded, “When you look at those two political parties, we’ve actually been living under a dictatorship of two right-wing corporate parties for a long time now. And it’s time for us to realize that that’s what’s been going on with us. They take our money. They try to pit us against each other. They’re not going to come to our rescue.

“The working class has to understand that we’re all we have. Nobody’s coming to our rescue. All the things that we thought that we put in place to help ourselves, to save ourselves, they’re all starting to collapse. Weingarten is being paid by the same people that the Democrats and the Republicans are being paid by. She’s not going to help us.”

Carolyn said, “I’m not sure how this fits in, but I was reading an article about [UAW President] Shawn Fain working on partnering all the unions’ contracts together to end on the same date. [The idea is] working towards organizing a national strike, like in 2028. That’s a long time away, but the premise is very attractive to get all school districts to have their contracts end at the same date.

“They say it is illegal to strike, but if we don’t have a contract, we can strike. I also recognize that the rule of law is very thin now, so maybe that’s moot.”

“I do agree with moving away from traditional parties,” she said, but expressed concern that it would take too long. She asked if it wouldn’t be better to work “collaboratively with an infrastructure that’s already there.” She said, “Time is of the essence, and the goal to deconstruct and eliminate the Department of Education is geared for next December, so I’m very, very concerned about our capacity to do a whole lot in a short amount of time if we don’t collaborate to some extent with some of the establishment.”

Jerry White cautioned, “What action one takes has to be thought through. We are dealing with a government that prepared for four years to carry out this assault. The reason we raise the issue of the trade union bureaucracy is that as the working class begins to move, there are always those who seek to prevent it from drawing conclusions from those struggles.

“To give the example of the mass strike wave of 2018 again, this movement arose totally independent of the trade union bureaucracy, but there were those, including the Democratic Socialists of America, that insisted that this powerful movement of working class had to look back to the union apparatus and the Democrat Party. The claim is always made, ‘We don’t have time.’ There are various pragmatic arguments, ‘Don’t divide the people,’ etc. But history has demonstrated again and again that if the movement is subordinated to the trade union bureaucracy—the Shawn Fains of the world, or the AOCs or Bernie Sanders—they are destroyed.

“The latest claim from Shawn Fain was that Trump has put a ‘stain on his working-class agenda’ by firing one of the members of the National Labor Relations Board. He went on to clearly state that the UAW is willing to work with Trump. In fact, he claimed that Trump’s trade war policies—which are aimed at dividing Canadian, American and Mexican

workers against each other—somehow represents the interests of the working class. Fain switched from calling Trump a ‘scab’ to now a champion of the working class. In short, this is not who workers can look to.

“As the sister said earlier, we have to give up on that and repudiate any subordination to the union apparatus, but develop a powerful movement from below. That is how we will answer the attacks of our class enemies.”

Clare, a high school educator, spoke, saying, “It is ridiculous to me to see the rich oligarchy says that the Department of Education has to be dismantled. They’re rich, they don’t know what a public school looks like, and what we go through. They say, ‘send it back to the states.’ But the states have routinely and repeatedly cut the budget for education and left us with scraps and crumbs. Then they complain about what we are not doing. But they can buy prisons.

“I can’t get my class of 47 students active in their technology requirements with only 30 computers and no WI-FI. They can’t do work at home on computers they get from schools because you haven’t given our families reliable access to WI-FI networks. When we complain to our unions, they fall flat. I don’t want to compromise. Give us what we need.

“Education is needed everywhere. We pay the price; our children pay the price. We have schools with no heat and schools with no air conditioning. The teachers are the ones advocating for our students, not the superintendents who often make more than the US president. We have to stand up for ourselves and fight for ourselves,” she said.

Larry Porter agreed that Trump aims to destroy public education. “They’re in the process of doing that already.” But, he said, “the union officials, colluding with the Democratic Party, have assisted in that destruction. These unions are not playing the role that they played in the 1930s when they were led by socialists. The main task of the union bureaucracies now is figuring out how they can prevent a struggle.”

He emphasized that the working class needs a new avenue, one that is anti-capitalist and independent of the two parties of the rich. That, he said, is the purpose of building and expanding these rank-and-file committees and turning out to the powerful working class more broadly.

The meeting ended with a vote, by 92 percent, to endorse the statement, “Hands off immigrant children and parents! Build the Educators Rank-and-File Committee to defend democratic rights!” and with teachers pledging build the committee.

*To join the fight to build educators rank-and-file committees, fill out the form below.*



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