

Educators discuss Khalil detention, Trump's cuts at Detroit school board meeting

Our reporters
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Join the upcoming online meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Committee (US), “Free Mahmoud Khalil! Mobilize the working class against Trump’s dictatorship! Defend the right to public education!” on Saturday, March 15, at 12:00 p.m. EDT. Register here.

The Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) held its monthly board of education meeting Tuesday night as the Trump administration ramped up its dictatorial assault on free speech and the right to public education.

The meeting took place as Columbia University graduate and pro-Palestinian activist Mahmoud Khalil continued to be held in an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center in Louisiana after being snatched from his New York home Saturday. Threatening mass arrests against all those opposing the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza, Trump took credit for the seizure of the legal permanent resident, saying, “This is the first arrest of many to come. We will find, apprehend, and deport these terrorist sympathizers from our country—never to return.”

Shortly after the school board meeting began, news emerged that the federal Department of Education (ED) would be closed Wednesday for “security reasons,” and 1,314 employees would be fired. In a Fox News interview Tuesday evening, Education Secretary Linda McMahon acknowledged that the job cuts—which, combined with previous forced “buyouts,” would cut the ED workforce by half—were part of plans to shut the nearly half-century-old federal department. The president’s “directive to me, clearly, is to shut down the Department of Education, which we know we’ll have to work with Congress to get that accomplished,” she said.

According to a letter DPSCD Superintendent Nikolai Vitti sent to school employees last week, budget cuts being proposed by the Republican-controlled Congress would slash federal K-12 school funding by 25 percent. This includes cuts to Title 1 (students from low-income families), the possible elimination of Title 2 (professional development) and reductions in Title 3 (English-language learners) and Title 4 (incentives for student attendance, STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering and Math] and school support). Other cuts would hit free and reduced-price meals, and career, technical and early childhood programs, along with Pell Grants and other financial assistance

for college students.

The 50,000-student Detroit school district, which is already chronically underfunded and understaffed, could lose \$30-\$80 million a year as a result, Vitti said in his letter. A representative from the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) at the school board meeting said that up to \$200 million could be cut, or 18 percent of the district’s annual budget.

Vitti announced at the meeting that the school board’s finance committee was already reviewing “potential cuts” due the budget resolution in Congress. He said that a government shutdown, which could begin midnight Friday, would mean “there would be no flow of dollars” and the district would quickly exhaust whatever it had in its fund balance just to operate the district at the beginning of the next school year.

“I don’t believe right now we’re looking at things like closing schools,” he said, “but there will be scenarios with maybe accelerating the phase out of schools, closing smaller high schools, and possibly looking at layoffs.”

In the 2023-24 school year, the board carried out \$300 million in budget cuts, eliminating 300 jobs, including college transition advisers, school culture facilitators, and kindergarten paraeducators. Like school districts across the country, Detroit was hard hit by Biden’s cut-off of federal COVID-19 school funds under Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER).

During the public participation portion of the meeting, Jerry White, speaking on behalf of the Socialist Equality Party and the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee, addressed the audience and drew the connection between the illegal detention of Mahmoud Khalil and Trump’s plans to destroy public education.

White called the government abduction of Khalil a “chilling attack” on democratic rights that “educators and all workers and young people must oppose.” He added that Khalil’s shipment to an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center 1,300 miles away and denial of any contact with family and legal representatives “were the actions of a dictatorship, plain and simple.”

He continued:

If the president can do this to a student for exercising free speech, why not to striking workers who are fighting job cuts, or to teachers and parents and students resisting the destruction of public education?

White pointed to the mass firing of federal Department of Education employees and the severe cuts to schools, along with the funneling of billions to the privatization of schools. “This means the destruction of public education,” he said.

In the face of this, he explained, the Democrats, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) were “rolling over” and collaborating in the cuts.

But educators, parents and young people had to fight. “We have to defend the right of our children to public education,” White said to applause. “We have to stop the looting of society’s resources to fund more tax cuts to the rich and more wars.”

He concluded by urging workers to attend the online meeting this Saturday sponsored by the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) to mobilize the working class to fight for Khalil’s release and the defense of public education and all social and democratic rights.

In opposition to the “do-nothing union bureaucracies,” White said, “rank-and-file committees are fighting to unite educators with autoworkers and every other section of the working class to fight for our rights.”

In her comments, DFT President Lakia Wilson-Lumpkins said the slashing of funding for “our children, our families in poverty, students with special needs, and youth seeking post-secondary training to benefit billionaires is unacceptable.”

But despite her claim that the AFT and DFT “never roll over,” Lumpkin could propose nothing other than making calls to the fascist in the White House and the social arsonists in Congress and the Michigan state legislature. “Let your hurt, anger, frustration and feelings of betrayal be heard,” she said. “They work for us.”

She concluded by thanking Vitti and the other Democrats on the school board for supporting the DFT’s toothless “March4Education” stunts last week, which involved wearing red shirts and urging parents to appeal to Congress.

Such advice is worse than useless. Both the Republicans and the Democrats work for the corporate oligarchy, not the working class. Both parties have been waging a bipartisan war against public education for decades, including Obama’s slashing of Title 1 funding, promotion of for-profit charter schools and attacks on teachers.

Supporters of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee distributed the *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board statement demanding Mahmoud Khalil’s release and information about Saturday’s online meeting.

Tina, a veteran educator, told WSWs reporters that Trump was “trying to run a dictatorship here in the US,” and that many immigrant families were afraid of sending their children to school. She denounced the detention of Khalil and said:

We were brought up to speak our mind, and it’s a free country, or at least we thought so. I’m trying to teach my grandchildren to speak their minds, you know, living in the world today, it’s just hard.

She continued, “The only way to do this is to unite,” adding that the billionaires

are going to have a fight on their hands because we’re not going to let them take it. ... A handful of people hoarding the millions, billions of dollars in the world. It’s not helping us, it’s not helping our children and future generations.

She added that she and her husband, who is also a teacher, are “out spending our hard-earned dollars, buying things for classrooms.”

If they funnel money into school vouchers for private education, she concluded,

Where does that leave the poor kids, the ones who can’t afford the rest of the tuition? It leaves us in a predicament where our kids don’t get educated, and that’s exactly what they want. They don’t want us to have an education.

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