

As its contract expires, the Detroit Federation of Teachers hands its podium to the school superintendent

Phyllis Steele

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The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT)'s union meeting May 14 demonstrated once again that the union serves as the mouthpiece for the Democratic Party-run school administration.

With hundreds of students and families bitter and angry over the district's decision to close four more neighborhood schools, the union handed its meeting over to Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) Superintendent Nikolai Vitti, the architect of the closure plan. For its part, the union mounted no resistance to the school closures.

Instead, Vitti was invited by the union to endorse Proposal S, a schools millage renewal set to appear on the August 4 ballot. The measure, backed by the Democratic Party and the state government, requires workers to vote for taxes in the hopes of preventing the collapse of public education in the city.

The meeting did not inform educators on contract negotiations, much less poll them for their demands. In short, there were no preparations made for strike action to recoup years of concessions.

At the time of the last contract in 2023, DFT officials rammed through a contract that only 26 percent of the membership voted for—accepting \$300 million in budget cuts, eliminating over 300 positions, including paraprofessionals and contracted school nurses. The union accepted below-inflation rate pay raises only for those at the top of the salary schedule, and structured the ballot so that there was no option for educators to vote to strike.

Vitti closes schools

This Friday, June 12, is the final day for four DPSCD schools: Ann Arbor Trail Magnet School, J.E. Clark Preparatory Academy, Catherine Blackwell Institute and Greenfield Union Elementary-Middle School. Vitti recently added another: Thurgood Marshall Elementary-Middle School on Detroit's west side, which will close at the end of the 2026–27 school year. Marshall serves over 350 students, including a large population of exceptional-needs children for whom displacement is a major trauma.

Vitti argues the district has 72,000 seats for only 50,000 children and was spending \$20,000 to \$25,000 per student to keep certain buildings open. What he does not explain is who bears

responsibility for the enrollment collapse that produced that gap—decades of state-imposed emergency management, charter proliferation and the deliberate strangulation of public school funding by both Democrats and Republicans.

Enrollment did not fall on its own. It was driven down by policy, including the ending of the ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund) pandemic relief funds by Biden-Harris and the rise of poverty in the city due to the betrayals of the United Auto Workers bureaucracy and more. Now working class families are being asked to absorb the consequences.

What Proposal S is—and who pays

There is widespread confusion about what Proposal S actually is and who it will affect. Here is the reality. The millage is an 18-mill operating levy on what Michigan law calls “non-homestead” properties—meaning any property that is not the owner's primary residence. That includes businesses, commercial buildings, vacant lots, second homes and rental properties. Owner-occupants—homeowners who live in their own houses—do not pay this tax. Vitti's claim that it is “not a new tax or a higher tax” is technically true as a matter of millage arithmetic: Voters approved the identical 18-mill levy in November 2024 under DPS, and the August vote would simply transfer the collection authority to DPSCD, which now actually runs the schools. The rate does not go up.

But Vitti's assurance obscures the question that matters most for Detroit's working class: What happens to renters? In Detroit, where the majority of residents are renters and working class households are already squeezed, the answer is obvious: Property tax costs flow through to rent. Detroit's renters do not receive a millage bill. They pay it anyway—in their monthly rent.

In other words, the businesses and corporate landlords who own non-homestead property in Detroit—including billionaire Dan Gilbert's Bedrock real estate empire, properties owned by the super-rich Ilitch family (Little Caesars, Detroit Red Wings hockey club) properties and large commercial landlords—are *nominally* the ones paying this millage. But

because they receive massive tax abatements and credits, their effective tax burden is already drastically reduced.

Vitti's "no new tax" formulation is a form of fiscal mystification. It obscures who actually bears the burden of a levy that exists in the first place only because bondholders were protected, the School Aid Fund was looted and the working class has been asked repeatedly to make up the difference.

The creation of DPSCD out of DPS was itself a looting operation against the working class. From 2009 to 2015, five consecutive state-appointed emergency managers ran Detroit Public Schools. They borrowed repeatedly, converting short-term loans into long-term liabilities, until the district's total debt reached \$3.5 billion, debt that teachers, students and Detroit's working class communities had no part in creating.

When the state's 2016 "rescue" package created DPSCD as a successor district, bondholders were made whole. Wall Street was protected. The new district was saddled with debt service it could not afford, while workers were told austerity was unavoidable. As school board member Ida Short admitted at the March board meeting: "This money we should not have to pay. The state should eat the debt that they created."

Meanwhile, the tax base that should have funded Detroit's schools was systematically diverted upward. In 2017, a federal judge cleared \$34.5 million in state education funds—money Detroit voters had been told would go to classrooms when they approved a 2012 millage—to be redirected to the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) to subsidize construction of Little Caesars Arena for the Ilitch family. That came on top of over \$250 million already captured from the same tax base; the DDA is projected to collect \$726 million in school property tax revenues through 2051—when that money should be going to Detroit schools, students and teachers!

The Democratic-controlled Detroit City Council approved a \$60 million tax abatement for billionaire Dan Gilbert on top of \$618 million in brownfield credits and over \$1 billion in total legislative giveaways. General Motors alone has received Michigan Economic Growth Authority tax credits approaching \$3.5 billion from the state government. The cumulative diversion of School Aid Fund money from K-12 education since 2010 approaches \$9.5 billion.

Now Detroit's workers are being asked to vote to extend the taxation that fills the hole left by the theft of this money. This is not a rescue of public education, it is a transfer of the cost of Wall Street's and the billionaires' plunder onto the backs of workers.

The August 4 millage vote creates a context in which any strike by Detroit teachers after June 30 can be framed by the district and the union apparatus as sabotage of a district already fighting for its financial survival. The DFT bureaucrats know this, and that is why they invited Superintendent Vitti to the union meeting. The invitation communicates to DPSCD, the city, Detroit Mayor Mary Sheffield and Lansing: We are partners in this campaign; we will back shifting costs onto the backs of the largely impoverished population; we are not preparing to strike.

What the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee demands

The June 30 deadline is an opportunity. It will be squandered unless teachers organize now, independently of the DFT apparatus. We urge teachers to begin forming rank-and-file committees in every Detroit school, inviting parents and guardians, discussing what educators and students need and formulating non-negotiable demands for this contract fight. These committees should be democratically controlled by teachers and school workers, excluding existing union officers and Democratic Party officials and their cronies who have conspired against them, coordinating across buildings and connecting with educators statewide, including in Ann Arbor and Pontiac, and more broadly through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee suggests the following demands as a starting point:

- **Halt all school closings immediately and commit to modernizing and repairing every DPSCD building.**
- **Make teachers whole for years of concessions. Wages sufficient to maintain a family on a single teacher's income—a minimum 50 percent increase.**
- **Restore fully paid healthcare and pensions for all DPSCD teachers, without qualification.**
- **Fully fund special education, services for English learners and mental health resources. Schools must be welcoming and accessible for all students, including the exceptional-needs children being uprooted by Thurgood Marshall's closure.**
- **Full public transparency on DFT contract demands and a strike authorization vote before June 30—not after the millage, not the night before school opens.**

This must be paid for at the expense of the Ilitches, Dan Gilbert and other oligarchs, along with the wealthy investors who control the Detroit Three automakers. Reclaim the \$9.5 billion diverted from the School Aid Fund. Cancel the tax abatements. The wealth exists. The question is who controls it: the workers who produced it or the corporate and financial aristocracy?

Contact the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee to get involved in the fight for a just contract and independent working class organization. wsws.org/edsafety



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