Detroit legal aid strikers call for unity: “We should all be out together”

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More than 80 public defenders, social workers, paralegals, and support staff walked out on July 24 against the Neighborhood Defender Service (NDS), an agency that handles about half of the indigent defense cases throughout Wayne County. Workers, members of UAW 2325, have been offered a blatantly concessionary deal: a 1 percent pay increase over three years, coupled with the destruction of their fully employer-paid healthcare plan.

On Wednesday, UAW President Shawn Fain visited the Detroit picket line, delivering a speech for social media that acknowledged “workers are going backward,” while claiming “a million UAW members stand behind you.” The speech, heavily seasoned with swear words to simulate militancy, simply told the strikers to “keep doing what you’re doing.”

While there is no doubt widespread, latent support among UAW members for the strike, Fain and the UAW bureaucracy have been hard at work sabotaging the unity of legal workers. More than 500 public defender workers are now on strike or engaged in job actions across New York, Michigan and Texas—isolated from one another, contract by contract, office by office.

Last year, the UAW aligned contracts across 12 Local 2325 chapters for sectoral bargaining. But instead of coordination, the bureaucracy has been dividing workers. Brooklyn Defender Services workers struck earlier this month, only for Local 2325 officials to announce a tentative agreement on July 22 and shut the strike down. Two days later, NDS workers walked out alone in Detroit, Harlem and San Marcos; three days after that, some 300 workers at the Bronx Defenders followed. Informational pickets have since spread to Houston and San Antonio.

Will Lehman, a socialist Mack Trucks worker for UAW president on a platform of abolishing the bureaucracy and replacing them with democratic rank-and-file committees, issued a message of solidarity calling for a unified walkout across the entire legal services sector to break the isolation and warned the workers about the betrayals of the union officials.

Lehman urged workers to form independent rank-and-file committees to ensure their demands are met and warned of the UAW bureaucracy’s history of divide-and-conquer tactics against the membership. “This is not bad timing, and it is not confined to legal services. It is the strategy of the Fain administration in every section of this union...This bureaucracy cannot be reformed but has to be abolished.”

Detroit pickets welcomed WSWS reporters. One picket who said he was also a socialist strongly supported expanding the strike. “I agree we should all be out together.”

“If there’s any type of proposal that leads to members paying for health insurance coupled with a low cost of living increase, that means our members for this next contract are going home with less money in their pockets, and that’s unacceptable,” stated Sarah Khan, a member of the bargaining committee. She noted that NDS is paying managers $500-a-day bonuses to cross the picket line and keep offices running during the strike.

Michelle, a paralegal, described rising rents, unpayable bills and stagnant pay. “A lot of us are struggling to keep up with bills, struggling with rent, myself included,” she said, noting that many colleagues carry six-figure student loan debt—one attorney on staff owes roughly $250,000 from law school alone.

Strikers explained that NDS management has resorted to retaliation. Staff attorney Megan Gokey told the WSWS she is facing criminal contempt proceedings after refusing to abandon her picket line and appear in court for a scheduled trial, even though her client explicitly backed her right to strike and asked for an adjournment rather than be handed a new, unfamiliar attorney.

“I’m federally protected and allowed to strike,” Megan,

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a public defender for seven years, said. “If we’re not paid fairly, if we’re not given fair benefits, and if we’re not respected by management, then I can’t stay here. And a lot of us at this office can’t. So, we are on strike in order to be able to fill our cups up to pour into our clients.”

She added, “None of us get into this work to make money. You know, we are all at NDS because it’s a holistic public defense office...[our clients] are not criminals. It’s people who can’t afford food. It’s people who are unhoused due to whatever issues they may have.”

NDS was founded in Harlem in 1990 as an independent public defense organization, distinct from the much larger Legal Services Corporation network. It describes itself as a “holistic” defender office, deploying not just attorneys but social workers, investigators and paralegals on behalf of clients who cannot afford private counsel.

When NDS opened its Detroit office in 2019, it was contracted to handle a quarter of Wayne County’s circuit court-appointed felony cases. That share has since exploded to roughly half of all such cases, as decades of cuts to social services under both parties have swelled the ranks of the criminalized poor. Caseloads at NDS have more than doubled since 2019, without any corresponding increase in staff wages or resources.

Indeed, the strike is unfolding in a city whose name has become synonymous with American poverty. Census Bureau data released last year found that more than half of Detroit’s children—51 percent—live below the poverty line, three times the national rate. The city’s overall poverty rate climbed to 34 percent, making Detroit the poorest major city in the country among those with populations over 500,000.

Staff attorneys Alexa Mitchell and Lauren Methner described a housing court system overwhelmed by evictions, with five judges each handling roughly 100 cases a day, the overwhelming majority involving tenants living under 200 percent of the poverty line—disproportionately single mothers, people of color and seniors trying to survive on Social Security alone.

Social Security, added Alexa, “is not enough to cover housing, let alone grocery bills, DTE (utility) bills, water bills.”

Lauren noted a current dispute over Detroit’s Certificate of Compliance ordinance, which could impact thousands of eviction cases. Currently, landlords are legally required to hold certificates of compliance verifying that their properties are livable, a law that, for years, went essentially unenforced. She said, “Many Detroit landlords do not have that [certificate], and are not keeping their properties up to code, but many of our clients can’t afford to go other places.”

Asked about the celebrated “revitalization” of downtown Detroit, Alexa did not mince words: the money flowing into gleaming new developments comes from “one or two billionaires,” while working-class Detroiters are being priced out by rising rents even as nearby schools contend with lead-contaminated water. “It’s not actually helping the people of Detroit,” she said. “It’s kind of pushing them out.”

The stakes of this struggle are visible on Detroit’s picket lines. The same austerity being imposed on the city’s poorest residents through gutted social services, unaffordable housing and a punitive court system is being imposed on the very workers whose job is to defend them, while the resources for healthcare, decent wages and social infrastructure sit instead in the accounts of billionaire developers and the budgets of police, prisons and militarism.

Lehman’s call to action to legal defenders emphasized that the problem lay in the capitalist system. “Consider who you defend—the immigrant worker facing a deportation flight, the mother fighting through family court for her children, the tenant hauled before a judge for the crime of living in poverty,” he said. “These are workers and workers’ families, and their conditions are not ‘policy failures’ but the ruthless function of capitalism, a system in which a handful of billionaires own the wealth the working class produces while the courts, the jails and the deportation machine exist to oppress us.”

He called on legal aid workers to form rank-and-file committees at every office, elected by and answerable only to the membership, with every bargaining session reported back in full and in real time “so that no agreement can be handed to you as a finished fact.”

NDS workers are discovering, alongside educators, autoworkers, healthcare employees and transit workers nationwide, that defending their living standards means uniting the fragmented walkouts into a single fight—and building the rank-and-file organizations, independent of both the corporate-controlled two-party system and the union apparatus that answers to it.

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