

The great unmentionable at Detroit's Labor Day parade: Labor

By Shannon Jones
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AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and assorted Michigan Democratic politicians gave the cold shoulder to striking Detroit teachers at Detroit's annual Labor Day parade held Monday. Seven thousand Detroit teachers, members of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), are entering their second week of strike against the district's drastic concession demands, including a 5.5 percent pay cut, increased out-of-pocket healthcare payments and the reduction of sick days.

A delegation including hundreds of striking Detroit teachers as well as Northwest Airline flight attendants led the march. Like the teachers, the flight attendants are facing massive concession demands amounting to an overall 40 percent cut in pay and benefits. The flight attendants were recently hit with a federal court injunction barring them from striking.

Two of the state's leading Democratic politicians, Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, have denounced the teachers' strike and indicated they are prepared to ask for an injunction if the leadership of the AFT does not end the strike and impose a settlement on management's terms. Under Michigan law, teachers could face fines of up to one day's pay for each day the walkout continues.

This did not prevent the big business lackeys of the AFL-CIO from turning the annual Labor Day parade into little more than a campaign event for the Democratic Party. While Granholm and Kilpatrick tactfully kept a low profile, the podium was packed with other Democratic officials and hopefuls, including Congressman John Conyers and Michigan Democratic Floor Leader Mary Waters.

In his brief remarks Sweeney did not mention the fact that 7,000 teachers were on strike in the city, let alone offer them any support. He ignored the threats of the

Democratic governor to impose a court injunction and fines on the teachers. Instead he enjoined workers to back Granholm in her bid for reelection, insisting that workers had "no better friend."

Other top AFL-CIO officials, International Association of Machinists President Tom Buffenbarger and International Union of Painters President Jimmy Williams, likewise ignored the teachers, instead heaping praise on Granholm and other Michigan Democrats.

For his part Congressman John Conyers of Detroit, who postures as an opponent of the war in Iraq and a left critic of the official Democratic House leadership, made no mention of the threats against the teachers. His remarks were limited to a call for Democrats to take the "historic" opportunity to win back control of the US House of Representatives from the Republicans in the upcoming November midterm elections.

As for the leadership of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), it barely let its presence be known. No representatives of the DFT spoke from the platform at the end of the march. The union issued no statement or leaflet for distribution at the parade to build support for the teachers among other workers or Detroit residents. Nor did it protest in any way the lack of public backing by the AFL-CIO.

There is no doubt that plans by the DFT leadership for a sellout of the strike are under way. The DFT leadership continued negotiations with school officials throughout the weekend. Schools are set to open this week, staffed by administrative personnel and support staff not in the DFT.

The spectacle at the Detroit Labor Day parade underscores the fact that the alliance of the AFL-CIO with the Democratic Party renders it incapable of defending even the most elementary needs of working

people. Its insistence on the subordination of the working class to the electoral needs of the Democrats in practice means surrender to the offensive by corporate America to gut jobs, healthcare and education.

The small turnout at the parade itself was a further indication of the alienation of the official trade unions and the workers they claim to represent. Only a small fraction of the 7,000 teachers on strike in Detroit turned out for the parade. Delegations from other unions were even smaller. The presence of the United Autoworkers members was insignificant relative to its active membership in the area. Small wonder! Over the past 25 years the UAW bureaucracy has presided over one betrayal after another, culminating in the decision to agree to cuts in healthcare for active and retired workers at General Motors and Ford and to accede to a new round of plant closings.

The hostility and indifference displayed by the trade union bureaucracy at the Labor Day parade was in contrast to the militant mood prevailing among teachers, most of whom indicated they planned to defy any court injunction.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party received a warm response from teachers and other workers to a leaflet they distributed headlined “Victory to the Detroit teachers.”

As one teacher declared, “They want to take and take and take. We are not going back with an injunction, we are going to continue the strike.”

These sentiments were shared by other teachers spoken to by the WSWS, who also talked about their concern over the deteriorating conditions in the schools and the struggle they face as educators to help students achieve under ever more unfavorable conditions.

Denese, a teacher with 30 years seniority, commented, “I think they are trying to move the poor out of the city. They feel they are a bother. They are in the way.

“Wal Mart has to have workers. They want to keep wages low so they keep people from being educated. They keep the class sizes large so teachers are overworked. They don’t give the teachers the supplies they need. That means that the students they let graduate are only going to be qualified to work for low wages.

“They are constantly trying to take things away from

us. At the same time I am constantly taking attending classes and seminars in order to upgrade my skills so I can reach these kids. We have very difficult students, but you can overcome that with the right support.

“I have heard politicians say, ‘Let’s get rid of the bad teachers.’ But who is going to replace them? Who will put up with the low pay and bad conditions? Many of the better teachers go to the suburban schools.”

A first year teacher told the WSWS she planned to stand with other teachers in opposing a court injunction. “I think the only way people have ever gotten what they want is to fight for it. It is hard and it is scary, but it is important to get what we need. I don’t think Kilpatrick has the interest of the city and the education system at heart.

“I noticed that the mission statement on the wall at the school where I teach says: ‘To prepare students to serve their next customers.’ I found that disgusting. It clearly states the purpose of the school is not to empower students to meet their full potential, but to meet the needs of industry. It doesn’t have the development of students as human beings as a priority.”

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