

National union leader tries to corral protesting Detroit teachers

By Jerry White
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Hundreds of teachers crowded into a meeting of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) Thursday afternoon after three straight days of “sick-out” protests led to the closure of 93 out of the school district’s 97 school buildings.

Educators in the city are protesting deplorable conditions in the schools, which have only worsened during six years of state-controlled emergency management, and the threatened bankruptcy of the school district by April.

The sick-outs were launched independently of the DFT, which has long collaborated with state and local officials in the attack on teachers’ jobs, wages and benefits, and in the diversion of public resources to for-profit charter school companies, testing firms and consultants. Since 1999, the membership of the DFT has fallen from 12,500 to 7,000 during the last teachers’ strike in 2006, to as few as 3,000 today.

Teachers were apprehensive about what they were going to hear from union officials but listened as the head of the DFT’s parent union, the American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, used a combination of false praise, lies and threats to dampen the resistance of teachers.

Weingarten flew in from her Washington, DC headquarters to contain the insurgent teachers’ movement, which has both encouraged and given expression to the growing mood of social protest among educators and far broader sections of the working class.

Weingarten, a close political ally of President Obama, has spent the last seven years helping the administration impose its reactionary program of “school reform,” which has included the destruction of hundreds of thousands of teachers’ jobs, the closing of hundreds of schools and the expansion of test-based “accountability” schemes to destroy tenure and the wages and conditions of teachers.

Sensing the rebellious mood of the audience, Weingarten and other officials suggested that the union might call for a strike authorization vote, but not at the current meeting. Weingarten then made the lame excuse, “We can’t publish the day we’ll vote to strike because then everyone will know what we are doing.” She then praised Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) President Karen Lewis for leading a “successful strike” and “knowing who our enemies are.” Weingarten then asked: “Are we going after Earley or after Lansing?”

All of this was empty rhetoric. The AFT and its local affiliates have all but banned strikes. The 2012 CTU strike was shut down before it developed into a full-blown confrontation with Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Obama administration. The CTU accepted the mayor’s demands for expanding punitive teacher evaluations and gave a green light to the shutdown of 50 schools and layoffs of more than 1,000 teachers. At present, the CTU is forcing teachers to work without a new contract even as the mayor and state officials escalate the attack on their wages, health benefits and pensions.

Teachers at the Detroit meeting were increasingly restive as union officials outlined a bogus campaign of TV ads, toothless protests at the Detroit International Auto Show and social media campaigns. As complaints grew louder, Weingarten began shouting at teachers at the microphone.

The intervention by the AFT corresponded with stepped-up efforts by Democratic city officials and Republican state legislators to push through a restructuring plan, which will accelerate the privatization of the school district and escalate attacks on pensions. Several Republican legislators indicated that the new bills could include legal action and fines for teachers involved in future sick-out protests.

Educators gave a warm reception to campaigners who were distributing copies of the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter*, which included a statement, “Detroit teachers and the political struggle for public education.”

Lisa Robinson, a teacher with 17 years in Detroit and 27 years in the profession, told the WSWs, “It is imperative that we take a stand. We’re setting a precedent for all teachers because the union isn’t doing anything. I believe they are on the other side and are in cahoots with the politicians attacking us.

“They are using tests to decide if we are doing a good job and should have a job. What about testing the state senators and legislators? If we tested them on what they have done for education they would all be fired.

“There is enormous inequality in America. In my classroom every day I have to deal with a child who lives in a homeless shelter, another whose parents have alcohol problems and another nine-year-old who is responsible for caring for his seven-year-old sister. He is so exhausted he sleeps in the

classroom. It's not just in the inner cities; poverty is rising in the suburbs now and school districts like Farmington, Southfield and Warren are closing schools and making budget cuts."

A teacher with 20 years said, "We had to fight. Nothing was being done and the district was set to run out of money in April. The emergency manager and the governor don't care about any urban communities. Look at Flint. There were reports showing the Flint River was full of toxins from stuff that GM dumped into it. They just didn't care."

"The schools are rundown, with leaking roofs, mice and no heat, and all of this has been ignored. It doesn't matter what party is running things—Democrats like Obama or Republicans like Snyder—they are all for charters and destroying public education. Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, were supporting charters in Chicago before he became president."

"Everyone knows it's a lie to say there is no money for schools. This is a country with immense inequality. But money is going to state-run schools in the Education Achievement Authority (EAA) that are doing worse than public schools. The appointed principals are being indicted for embezzlement."

Another teacher said, "The movement by teachers is great; how else will our voices be heard? This was a grassroots movement by the people in the trenches, not the union. People are tired. The people in power have not been doing the right things whether it's education or water in Flint. When you don't have power you don't think you have the ability to make things happen. But we showed we have power."

"Workers have no say-so over policy and legislation. Instead there is an emergency manager over the schools that never stood in front of a classroom. This is the same guy who poisoned the water in Flint."

Sarah, another teacher, said, "The politicians, the union leaders and everybody else are trying to use the protests, which we started, to make deals for their own interests. (Emergency Manager Darnell) Earley, Duggan, Randi Weingarten, everybody says they support us. It's confusing to know who are friends and who are enemies. One thing is certain, however: we are at a boiling point and we have had a taste of our own success and learned we have power. They can't take that away."

Christa Byers, a second grade teacher, said,

"I feel the same as everyone else. I'm fighting for better working conditions, smaller classroom sizes, in defense of cost of living. Someone had to take a stand. Now at least we have gotten attention. Before we were just ignored." When asked about the response to the protests, Christa said, "The parents are very supportive. They agree we have to take a stand for the students."

Karl Hartwig, another veteran teacher, said, "Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan, really got me upset when he said Detroit was 'ground zero' for school reform and could

'leap frog' over New Orleans, which is now an all-charter district. Randi Weingarten has close relations with Bill Gates and all he is concerned with is putting a computer in every classroom and making billions more."

"The movement by teachers was extraordinary. People have had it up to their necks. This is a grassroots movement. I spoke with two of the teachers who started the sick-outs and there were regular teachers who just decided we had to fight."

Tracy Russell, told the WSWS, "The sick-outs are a response to deplorable conditions. Snyder ignores anybody who is concerned. In that respect this is analogous to Flint."

"We have been told we have to accept these conditions, especially under the Emergency Manager. However we feel that as the guardians of students we are expected to stand up for them. That's what we are doing here."

Frederica Phillips, a kindergarten teacher, said, "There are not enough bodies in the classroom. There have to be two people—a teacher and an aide—in kindergarten and first grade. There are 25 five-year-olds in my class and for a teacher to be effective we have to reach and touch every child. Instead I have to test each kindergartener three times a year and give them 127 questions each. This is not a serious assessment of students, which we need, but a way to attack our jobs."

"Teacher evaluation companies like Marzano are just out to make money. But education is not a business; we are dealing with human beings. We're sick of the Enron approach to schools."

"They say they have no money. But this is a city with professional sports teams spending millions on players and with billionaires like Mike Ilitch and Dan Gilbert. Earley is getting paid \$300,000 and each of his staff members \$100,000 but there is nothing to teachers and aides. I know one first grade teacher who is going to have 40 kids in her room when they combine classes."

"The rank and file should have rose up long ago. I'm from the old breed when we would go on strike every three years. The union stopped that. But we have a new breed coming up who are not going to take this, whether they are teachers or autoworkers."

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