

“Everyone feels very betrayed by the union right now”

Detroit teachers union holds rally to back governor’s school restructuring plan

By Walter Gilberti
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American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten had very few people to address Tuesday on the steps of the Michigan capitol in Lansing. Although the event was scheduled on a professional development day for the district’s 4,000 teachers, barely 200 people showed up for the long-planned demonstration organized by Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) Local 231, and other school worker unions.

The rally was a reactionary affair aimed at appealing to the state legislature to pass a series of bills supported by Republican Governor Rick Snyder. With the district reeling from the latest exposure of financial misdealing and corruption, the extreme right wing of the Republican Party is pressing their campaign for vouchers and/or the complete charterization of the former Motor City.

Under the guise of the lesser of two evils, the teachers’ union has thrown its full support to the State Senate bills proposed by the deeply hated Governor Snyder, now notorious across the US for his role in the Flint poisoning. The measure is being shepherded through by Snyder’s handpicked DPS emergency manager, Judge Steven Rhodes, who is likewise reviled for his decision to vacate the Michigan Constitution and slash Detroit city workers’ pensions and benefits.

“Everyone feels very, very betrayed by the union right now,” one teacher who boycotted the event told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “They keep saying ‘we want to rebuild your trust in us’ but I believe the AFT is controlled by the politicians, the same people making these decisions for us.”

The dismal turnout for this tawdry affair indicates the rapidly dwindling authority of the DFT and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, among teachers and support staff. The union’s month-long campaign involving “Labor to Neighbor” outings, supporting a MoveOn.org petition and assorted other publicity stunts ended up mobilizing a relative handful of teachers and students, along with the predictable community “activists,” preachers and the pro-union pseudo-left group BAMN (By Any Means Necessary).

AFT president Weingarten had the audacity to portray the coming votes on the pro-privatization legislation as a “moral moment,” adding that lawmakers should “do what is right and

just by funding our schools.” The AFT’s attitude toward the legislation is determined by the stipulation that it transfer “current employees to the Detroit Community Schools District while respecting collective bargaining,” i.e., that it maintain the union as a “partner” in the destruction of public education and teachers’ livelihoods. Moreover, the union is involved in ongoing efforts to “organize” charter schools so it can make up for lost membership and collect dues from the terribly exploited charter school instructors.

The well-heeled officialdom is strongly motivated by the threat to their income stream. Under Governor Snyder’s right-to-work laws, the DFT will lose dues check-off rights at the end of the month as their contract expires. After doing everything in their power to squash the independent sickout actions of the rank and file last January, the AFT has spared no effort in staging a series of phony “mobilizations” to give the appearance of concern over the fate of the hard-pressed Detroit schools. This is aimed at convincing teachers to sign up for “alternative dues collection” through their banks or credit cards.

Also speaking at the rally was DFT President Ivy Bailey and executive vice president Terrance Martin who also solidarized the union with Rhodes and his legislative mandate. Ignoring the self-contradiction, Martin went on to lay the entire blame for the crisis of Detroit schools on the state’s emergency management laws. “We’ve lost over half of our membership in the last 10 years because of these laws. We’ve closed over half of our schools because of these laws. And so we’ve been hit tremendously.”

As thousands of Detroit teachers know, the DFT did not let their phony opposition to the emergency manager law prevent them from collaborating with every emergency manager since Robert Bobb was named in 2009. The DFT accepted the entire framework dictated and controlled by the financial elite, and dutifully went hat in hand to beg, as long as they had a seat at the table. But when it came to the membership, they ruthlessly forced through giveback contracts and imposed ever-higher cuts in wages and benefits.

As a result, Detroit teachers, who were once the highest paid

in the state of Michigan, now are the lowest, and close to 10,000 teaching jobs have been eliminated.

Another teacher told the WSWS, “I did not go to Lansing because I do not trust the union or Randi (Weingarten). Snyder and his EM made the debt and they need to clean it up. They need to go to prison.”

In fact, the bulk of the DFT membership opposed or simply ignored the exhortations of Bailey and others to participate in Tuesday’s demonstration, refusing to be taken in by yet another charade foisted upon the ranks of teachers by this rotten organization.

Three months ago, the school district was rocked by a series of spontaneous teacher sickouts and student walkouts protesting both the dilapidated and dangerous conditions in the schools and the years of pay and benefits cuts teachers have endured. These actions, occurring in defiance of the DFT/AFT bureaucracy, alarmed sections both of the AFT hierarchy and the ruling elite. Weingarten and Vice President Ann Mitchell left their plush Washington, DC offices to fly into Detroit, launch a phony lawsuit against the district, hold candlelight vigils and various other stunts to shut down the independent initiative and corral the movement back into support for Democratic Party politicians.

It should be noted that many of the same local Democrats who claimed to support the sickouts are so integrated into the state conspiracy to dissolve the DPS afoot in Lansing that they urged the DFT to call off the rally two days prior to the event. Apparently fearful that their appeals to the Republican-dominated legislature to finance the reorganization of Detroit’s schools would be hampered by protesting teachers on the steps of the capitol building, a coterie of the Democratic “Black Caucus,” led by State Rep. Sherry Gay-Dagnogo, drafted a letter urging the DFT to call it all off.

However, the fact that the union went ahead with the event is not a function of any opposition to the Democrats. Rather, the DFT is desperate to posture as a viable police force to contain the militancy of the teachers, and to redirect their willingness to fight into reactionary activities like Tuesday’s rally.

“I’m not even sure why they had the rally today,” said a middle school art teacher who chose not to attend. “It was supposedly going to be the result of secret balloting in all the schools, but apparently some schools didn’t even ballot,” she told the WSWS.

“AFT President Weingarten is going all over the US. From one side of her mouth she says ‘I’m with your fight,’ on the other she is supporting charter schools. How do we know she isn’t right with the politicians? It’s obvious she is. This can’t just be happening over and over again without people being on the take. It can’t be a coincidence. There is some collusion happening.

“The DFT is supporting the Snyder bills. Both bills (the House and Senate) make the Detroit Public Schools second-class schools. They open the doors to the charter

system, give away the DPS to make money and give taxpayers’ money to charter schools. And it’s legal. These bills are a way to privatize DPS and turn it into a charter system.

“The system is creating throw-away human beings, paying them \$10 an hour. No one goes to a charter school and says ‘I’m staying here for my career, I’m invested in this school.’ No, people go to charters with the hope of getting a job in the public schools.

“Charter schools are a career path to nothingness; they open and close like cereal boxes. What are we doing to our children? A lot of them are located in an industrial building, not an environment for learning. What is the state of education? How can young people learn to be productive human beings?”

For its part, the pseudo-left group BAMN, led by deposed DFT President Steve Conn, while claiming to oppose the Snyder plan, advances a reactionary perspective combining appeals to racial politics with the bankrupt notion of “community control.”

In a leaflet posted on the eve of Tuesday’s rally, Conn called on teachers to attend the event behind the slogans, “Restore democracy in Detroit” and “End the new Jim Crow.” Conn’s organization, as always, functions as an auxiliary wing of the Democratic Party in Detroit, cozying up to the proponents of racial politics on the City Council and doing everything possible to divide the working class. The demand for “community control” coming from these quarters has nothing to do with democratic rights. Instead, it is a demand by the corrupt political establishment in Detroit, which has long overseen the destruction of the school system, to regain control of the district’s multi-million dollar budget and the business opportunities that arise from it.

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