

Detroit Federation of Teachers accepts merit pay, other concessions

By Phyllis Steele
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In another miserable betrayal, the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) has agreed to a new three-year contract proposal that would continue the decades-long erosion of teachers' living standards and working conditions and introduce a merit pay scheme, long demanded by the enemies of public education.

The DFT handed out "highlights" of its deal to a hastily called membership meeting, which was deliberately scheduled for the beginning of the long July 4 holiday to assure the lowest turnout. Only 200 of the 3,000 teachers in the district attended.

The deal accepts, without question, the bogus claims that the school district has no money to restore past concessions—including a 10 percent pay cut. This is despite the fact officials from the newly formed Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) are boasting of a \$64.5 million budget surplus.

The claim by DFT President Ivy Bailey "that we took no concessions under this proposal agreement" is an utter lie. Instead, the DFT is prostrate before every demand by the district, underscoring the fact that this is not an organization that defends teachers but a tool of the Democrats and Republicans and the financial interests they serve.

Acknowledging that the deal will not restore the 10 percent salary court or return the \$10,000 "loan" extorted from teachers by the district in 2009 supposedly to prevent layoffs, the DFT blandly says that the district "lacks appropriate funding from the state to make immediate restoration impossible."

The miserly raises of 3 percent in January 2018 and 4.13 percent in 2019 are paid in the second semester instead of the first, with a "wage reopener in the third year." The increases are in the second half of the year, the DFT says, because this is "a cost saving measure," which will save the district \$2 million.

Veteran teachers will receive a \$1,750 September 2017 bonus instead of a raise in base pay.

Why is this? "The district doesn't have to contribute to a Member's retirement account when offering a bonus," the DFT informational leaflet declares. "It does if the increase is rolled into wages. The approach results in a savings for the District."

Teachers who formerly worked at the Educational Achievement Authority of Michigan (EAA), who currently receive \$15,000 more than district teachers, will be considered "new hires," under the terms of the contract or a de facto pay cut of 30 percent. Many of these EAA teachers are veteran teachers who will simply leave the district.

Most significantly, the DFT has accepted merit pay for new hires, which means new teachers' salaries will be based on standardized test scores and whatever other arbitrary measurements the district and the DFT agree to. Like the other punitive accountability schemes, this shifts the burden of educational problems—caused by decades of budget cuts, school closings and the explosive growth of poverty—onto the shoulders of teachers.

This demand has been at the heart of every corporate-backed attack on public education, starting with the voucher proposals of free-market guru Milton Friedman, the "school choice" scam of Bill Clinton, Bush's No Child Left Behind, and Obama's Race to the Top. Merit pay has long been championed by billionaire opponents of public education like Bill Gates and Trump's education secretary Betsy DeVos.

In a Q & A section of the DFT informational leaflet, it asks: "Under this contract, are we subject to merit pay provisions?" It answers: "No. When policy related to merit pay is codified and implemented, it will not apply to current Members—only future hires."

Thus, the DFT is condemning the next generation of educators—young people bearing the burden of high student loan costs, and willing to sacrifice to teach students in the largely impoverished city—to the whim of administrators and politically connected officials.

Summing up, the DFT writes: "The proposal represents our best effort, considering the circumstances. DPSCD, unfortunately, is under the thumb of the state Financial Review Commission (FRC). The FRC must approve all contracts of this size. Given the trend of declining student enrollment, coupled with state and federal finance uncertainty, the FRC believes the DPSCD cannot produce a fiscally responsible budget beyond three years."

The DFT, along with the state Democratic legislators, claimed that the restructuring of the school district, the ending

of emergency management and the restoration of “local control” would make it easier for teachers to recoup their losses. In fact, the FRC is no less a tool of the wealthy bondholders than the emergency manager.

Last year, the DFT abandoned the traditional method of voting on contracts during mass membership meetings and sent the ballots out to schools. This year, they are sending the ballot to the homes of teachers to prevent them from coming together to reject this sellout deal.

The DFT-backed deal opens the way for an acceleration of the destructive pro-market agenda that both corporate-controlled parties have imposed on Detroit teachers for more than a decade. The slashing of school funding and diversion of public resources to for-profit charter operations have produced a catastrophe for teachers, parents and students alike. These measures have deliberately been used to drive down school enrollment, which, in turn, has been used to justify more cuts, more school closings and more diversion of money to private education businesses and scam artists.

Teachers should reject this contract with the contempt it deserves. But real lessons must be drawn. No organization that genuinely represented workers would present such a “contract” to workers. That is why teachers must break out of the jail of the DFT and build new organizations of struggle, controlled by rank-and-file teachers, which are independent of the two big business parties and dedicated to defending the social right to high-quality public education regardless of cries of poverty by the big business politicians.

Teachers at Friday’s meeting discussed their situation with reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*. Sharon said she was outraged by the proposal and is voting no. She explained that the pay raises will not even bring her back up to what she was making in 2006 and the TIP (Termination Incentive Plan) money is not going to be repaid until June 2022 with no interest paid to teachers for each of their \$10,000 ‘loans.’ “Since the contract is only three years, there is no guarantee teachers will ever see that money in 2022.”

Sharon complained that teachers were not given the contract in advance of the meeting, so they did not have time to formulate intelligent questions. “They did that on purpose,” she charged. “They don’t want us to ask questions.

“I am disappointed. After the raises we are getting, I will be making basically the same salary I got in 2006, more than a decade ago. That is not good, especially if you take inflation into account.

“Under this contract, they will be hiring in younger teachers at Step 3 with a Bachelor’s Degree at \$38,000 a year. I hired in 17 years ago at Step Four at \$39,500!

“And we are stuck with the same crappy health care plan. The union said it was a two-year deal so we will be stuck for at least another year.

“There was no discussion at the meeting of the elementary school teachers having four prep periods a week. In the past

teachers were paid if they had to miss a prep period. That way the district had some responsibility for making sure teachers got their prep periods.

“They are giving veteran teachers a \$1,700 bonus. It is a classic divide-and-conquer ploy, since the younger teachers will not get the bonus. They want to pit the older teachers against the younger teachers.”

She continued, “Teachers have been abused for so long, they don’t even realize they are in a bad relationship. I voted no last year and I am voting no again this time.”

She discussed the claims that there was no money to fund education. “It is not the poor that are holding us down. The Detroit City Council just gave the Pistons [Detroit professional basketball team] a big tax abatement [of \$34 million]. It is outrageous that the billionaire who owns the Pistons won’t pay taxes.”

“Every summer they have robbed you of your peace. It affects your cognitive abilities. You are not able to think the same. It is a scientific fact. The teachers are going to have to push the issues like we did during the sickout because the union won’t.”

One 16-year teacher said, “They have been making cost saving off our backs long enough. People are suffering financially. They are not paying teachers enough to retain or attract to the profession.

“The money is there. We deserve it. We come in early and stay late. We go above and beyond.”

Another teacher said she was tired of teachers being scapegoated. “They expect us to work miracles with kids who face all kinds of problems. We get blamed for everything.”

Speaking of the contract she said, “The main issue is that we need to be made whole. We need to get back the 10 percent they took and to receive back out TIP money.”

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