

The Theory and Practice of Constructing Hope: The Detroit Teachers' Wildcat Strike 1999

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Photo by John Smolinsky

The intricate movement of capital, in search of the most productive moments of surplus value, at a certain point reaches stages where the people Marx called, "the personifications of capital," must organize decay while at the same time they trail the revolutionary developments that capital demands. It is thus that those whom capital offers power, always a temporal deal, simultaneously stultify knowledge, by promoting and profiting from racism, for example, and chase the latest elusive technological change that will give them the slightest leg up on competition. In North American schools, this has meant the concurrent introduction of computer technology, and the exploratory possibilities of the world-wide web, alongside an international effort to tamp down the expectations of children who cannot expect to do as well as their parents, to regulate what is known and how students and educators come to know it -- and to control teaching methods, through standards and high-stakes tests. The purpose of the standards is reasonably clear: to promote nationalism, to occlude the workings of capital as they relate to exploitation and alienation, and to more profoundly segregate people along lines of race and class.

To achieve its ends, capital and its personifications have seized entire school systems - - obliterating elected parliamentary bodies and replacing the officials with representatives of wealth and power. The most glaring examples are in Chicago (Schmidt, 1999) and

Detroit. While the takeovers have been achieved through a display of sheer power and police action, the moves have frequently been supported by liberals who see no option, no choice but decisive action in educational settings which appear to them to offer nothing but despair. Jean Anyon, for example, in an otherwise brilliant analysis of how the Newark school system shipwrecked on the inequalities requisite of capital, suggests that the only hope for urban school districts is for the rich to give them their money (Anyon, 1997).

The absence of hope, the construction of desperation without chance of relief, is a theme of nearly every investigation of urban education at the millennium (Apple, 1997). When hope is offered, it is manufactured out of nearly religious stretches, dreams of better days which *must* come because the alternative horrors are unthinkable. In similar fashion, many radicals like the U.K.'s Stuart Hall abandoned hope as well, disappointed with the working class or other motors of history when, for instance, the 1968 uprisings in France did not bear revolutionary fruit. Folds in the same cloth, the liberals and radicals failed to understand change which takes the grounded patience that does not mistake apparent acquiescence for stupidity, speechlessness, or submissiveness, but grasps that this story is told not only in outbreaks and revolutions, but in the interim silences, which like the silent spaces between the music of a symphony, are necessary for comprehending the notes. Stillness is not acceptance or approval. Waves of resistance come from oppressed people who have given change considerable thought. The struggle on the color line (inseparable from the struggle of class and sexuality) remains the struggle at the close of the century. Black workers and poor people have played centripetal roles in the progressive changes of the 20th Century, and are key to the future. To build a more democratic society, to confront tyranny, the white working class will need demonstrate real solidarity to earn the trust of Black workers -- which for good reason has yet to be achieved. This involves the creation of a community of people engaged in gaining and checking ideas and practices to discover what is true, a society of people who can be critical yet loving, which is at the same time prepared to critique and act on the reality of Them and US.

Teachers create momentous value and surplus value. School workers and their students and communities, all of whom are daily confronted with the social nature of constructing ideas by creating value collectively, can act together to gain greater control over what they create, and can challenge the foundations of capital at the same time.

In August and September of 1999, Detroit educators struck the Detroit Public Schools. The strike demands focused on uniting students, parents, community people, and education workers. I was conducting a research project in DPS at the time the strike began and wrote daily reports on the strike, which were widely circulated on the internet. These are the reports. The initial report describes the social context of the strike. Later reports served as daily updates. The concluding report analyzes the DPS contract which was ratified by the teachers. The research project continues.

***Detroit Teachers Vote to Strike
August 31, 1999***

Around 2000 of the 3000 teachers attending a meeting of the Detroit Federation of Teachers voted to strike on August 30, 1999. There are 11,500 teachers in the school system. A huge "School Opening Rally" scheduled for Tuesday was cancelled. The strike vote flies in the face of a harsh state law, untested to date, that levies steep fines against striking teachers and their union. The strike vote also shatters the appearance of school reform in the city, a project which has spent about 150 million dollars refurbishing decrepit schools this summer, a reform directed by seven-member school board appointed by the Governor and Detroit's Mayor. The board seized the city's schools which serve about 180,000 children in 1999. The elected school board was abolished. The new board is primarily made up of representatives of industry, banks, and casinos, none of whom has experience as a school worker, the majority of whom does not live in Detroit.

Significantly, the strike vote also is a clear rejection of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) leadership which asked the membership to approve a ten-day extension of the contract, promising that the leaders had achieved success on many key issues. In fact, the DFT sent out a press release the evening before the vote which said the members had voted to return to work. The repudiation of the leadership by the rank and file, by at least a two-to-one margin, continues a trend inside teacher unions which reached a high mark in 1998, when the membership of the National Education Association, with more than two million members, by far that largest union in the U.S., defeated by a 60-40% vote a leadership proposal to merge with the smaller, urban-based AFT -- and to virtually adopt the AFT's undemocratic structure.

The union members met on August 30 at Cobo Hall, a huge convention center downtown. The rank and file members had heard radio reports the night before indicating that John Elliot, president of the DFT for 18 years, had already agreed to a ten-day contract extension. Elliot did nothing to allay that concern. Instead, he began the meeting by introducing a lawyer who started to outline the many sanctions government could levy against the union and educators in the case of a strike. Early on, teachers began to shout at her. She said, "And I thought teachers were supposed to be models of being polite!" They booed. Elliot intervened on her behalf, "I can see why many of you have discipline problems in your classrooms. You behave like your kids." This set off new rounds of booing, shouting -- and demands for a division of the body, not a voice vote, as teachers yelled that Elliot had "miscounted" in the past. One teacher said later, "We are sick of them talking down to us." Finally, one high school teacher took a microphone and said, "Everyone who wants to strike, move to the left. Everyone opposed to the strike move right." Elliot's choices ended as the vast majority moved left.

The leadership circulated an outline of the results of the last two months of bargaining. Included in the section of items completed was an agreement to give away seniority as a key factor in transfers referring the question to a site-based management committee. Class size limits, promised publicly by both the new board and the DFT leaders, are merely referred to a committee for "review and study." The DFT agreed on a proposal which indicates that if teachers use more than eight of their fifteen days of sick time, they will not get salary increases the following year. The agreement includes a merit pay section, which links pay increases to student performance on standardized tests and principal evaluations. Still on the table, with no agreement, are: pay, fringes like health benefits, longevity, duty periods, a longer work day, unpaid teacher education days, time off for union representatives, and sick bank accrual. There was no discussion in the meeting as to which section particularly annoyed educators, so the leadership is at a loss as to the direction to take. However, it is clear that the repudiated contract represents the general tendencies of "school reform," or "New Unionism," as it has been presented by the top leadership of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, an outlook rooted in the idea of educator/management/corporation unity.

In a press conference hours after the mass meeting and following a caucus of the top union leadership, DFT's Elliot blamed the vote on a "militant minority who always wanted to strike, and who were able to get people to the meeting today." In the same press conference, board Superintendent David Adamany, the former president of Wayne State University, urged teachers to start school on Tuesday, saying, "This strike is against the law. It is a matter of individual conscience, a decision for each teacher. It hurts the massive reform effort that is demonstrated by our success in repairing the schools." On August 31, only 150 teachers crossed the picket lines.

Adamany earlier had outlined three goals for starting the school year, other than the building repairs: Each child in a uniform, the arrest of parents of truant kids, and each teacher on the same page of the same text, each day. He said, further, "If this is a rejection of what we have already agreed to, which we must have, we are all in serious trouble." Adamany urged teachers to come to work but told parents to keep their children home, and said he would not request state help in invoking the law until he had a further chance to bargain.

The strike vote could have important implications. In the context of the labor movement, it could be the harbinger of things to come in Detroit, and perhaps around the U.S. In Detroit, the strike could, conceivably, spread. Professors at Wayne State University, the 35,000-student urban college serving the metropolitan area, may take a strike vote next week. Like the DFT, they are members of the AFT. In addition, later in September, the UAW will target an auto company, probably Chrysler, for a strike. In the context of the education community, the strike could inspire action elsewhere, like Chicago, where the union leadership has taken stances similar to the DFT leadership. NPR, on August

30, carried a statement from a dissident DFT member calling for a general strike in Detroit. Following the bitter loss of the Detroit newspaper strike, feelings run strong in metro-Detroit. The DFT has no plans to radiate the strike. However, the conditions of this strike make it possible that it could erupt into a social battle that could set aside decades of working class passivity.

There are other factors to consider. The level of opposition from management and government is a serious concern. While the size of the DFT makes it a big elephant among teacher unions, those arrayed on management's side are not merely tough bargainers, they are ideologues who have long fought to destroy unions. The state Governor, John Engler, who harbors vice-presidential ambitions, struggled for most of his political life to end what he sees as a union strangle-hold on the state. His efforts, coupled with the bungling of the Michigan Education Association, led to the passage of the law outlawing teacher strikes, as well as laws restructuring the tax system to shift the burden of education costs away from corporations and onto working and poor people. Schools are now funded by a property tax, guaranteeing that poor schools stay poor. One of his goals for 1999-2000 has been to end the agency shop clauses in teacher contracts, shifting that sector of the Michigan work force to a right-to-work state. Engler is known as a ruthless and cruel opponent. There is no question that his attention is focused on Detroit teachers.

David Adamany, the DPS Superintendent, made a reputation at Wayne State University attacking the faculty union -- to the extent that he was finally forced to resign after more than ten years on the job -- following a no-confidence faculty vote. Adamany was skillful at dealing with capital improvements. Wayne State building projects grew and prospered in the middle of a city in collapse. But, like Engler, he is seen as vindictive and vengeful -- and hot-tempered. He is well-known for taking decisive action against anyone who opposes him. Adamany, too, has long battled to change public education to a corporate model. At Wayne State, he initiated a program for freshmen and sophomores that put them on the same page of the same book -- teacher to teacher -- a move the faculty fought every year. In Detroit Public Schools, Adamany was expected to "clean house." But he has only been able to clean buildings. He told the district principals, in a spring meeting, that he would like to fire about one-half of them for "obvious incompetence." To date, none are fired. The district's personnel office is notorious. Teachers routinely do not get paid for months on end. Job applicants are treated like supplicants, ordered to pay steep fees to apply for a job. Adamany has not moved to change the personnel either.

He has considerable teacher and parent opposition, some of it taking root in his arrogance. In a summer meeting with teachers, he was challenged about what he would do as an educator facing disruptive students. "I would just put down my chalk and refuse to teach." Openly gay, Adamany, at the board meeting following his appointment, was met by a church-based group of parents chanting, "He's gay -- not with my kids!" and demanding his removal.

Adamany claimed, after the strike vote, that he was worried that a strike might propel parents into charter schools and support for a voucher amendment that will be on the Michigan ballot soon. But Adamany, as president of Wayne State, opened the first charter school in the state, and caused the dismissal of the dean of the college of education who refused to support him. Last year, the charter school scored lowest in the state on standardized exams. Still, hundreds of parents wait in line to enroll their kids in the school each fall.

The chairman of what is known as the "Takeover Board" is Freeman Hendrix, a mayoral aide who opened the first public meeting of the new board by inciting the two hundred police officers protecting the board from the citizens to assault students and parents who had come to protest the seizure of the school system. Hendrix, who lives in the city but whose children attend Catholic Schools, shouted at the cops, "Throw them out and arrest them. Now! Now! Now!" repeatedly over a public address system designed to drown out any sound of dissension. The police beat and maced middle-school girls who approached a microphone designated for public comment. They never got to the mike. Hendrix' approach continued week after week, culminating in the police beating of an older woman in the parking lot of a Detroit high school. He halted only when he was clearly threatened by a group of men who attended the next meeting, telling him he had caused beatings for the last time and offering him a "taste of pain." Hendrix has mayoral aspirations -- and Mayor Dennis Archer has hinted he hopes to leave the city to become the Chair of the Democratic National Committee. Archer, in the press conference, urged teachers to report to work on Tuesday. Hendrix, the following morning, issued statements of deep admiration for the DFT's Elliot, saying that the union president needs to rally his supporters and quickly hold another vote on the contract -- to end the strike.

Material conditions might suggest a prudent course for management: combining threats about the law, perhaps even an injunction, with rewards for returning to work, bargaining behind closed doors with the union leadership, a hurried meeting in which pro-contract votes are mustered and counted, a back to work order, and a new opening of the schools. But the personalities of the players are significant, and the people involved on the management side have a history of hot-headed behavior. These are not people accustomed to negotiations, the cynical give and take of corrupt union bargaining. The management side is composed of people who see the key issues, like merit pay, the end of seniority, control of the curriculum, etc., as matters of principle.

Of course, there is a lot at stake for them. The seizure of the Detroit public schools by the rich comes at a critical juncture in the history of the city and the state. Detroit today is third world. Key city streets look like tank traps. Electrical service is routinely interrupted for city and nearby suburban residents, for up to two weeks at a time. Public transportation is nonexistent in the Motor City. Vaccination rates of the city children run about 35%, while TB continues to be a force in some areas of the city. The day the first casino opened, the county had to

close 29 lakes, due to e coli poisoning. The lake inspectors were laid off days later. The Bureau of Labor Statistics lists 35 major layoffs of more than 100 people so far this year. Even so, the *Wall Street Journal* declared Detroit on the "comeback trail, " in mid-August. Housing prices are up for the first time in decades. On August 30, the day of the strike vote, the *Washington Post* carried a long article lauding Detroit's black mayor for leading a "dramatic turnaround," calling him a leader of the "post-civil rights era."

Thirty-five Detroit police officers were indicted for drug-related crimes this year. The former chief of police of a department with a long history of corruption is now serving time in Milan Federal Prison, just west of Detroit. The police department has settled millions in liability suits in the last few years -- making them a hated entity once again. The two officers who killed Malice Green, in a famous assassination, appear to be about to escape serious punishment. The murder rate is up, about 25%. Robberies, a rate determined by arrests made by a crooked police department, are down.

Detroit schools crawl with police, yet remain centers of drug dealing. Detroit students live under unremitting surveillance in school. They face an array of metal detectors, rules of citizenship (which strip them of their constitutional rights) and an endless stream of standardized exams -- though their teachers have no textbooks to offer many, even most, of them. One high school, whose principal moonlights as a local professor, opens each year with a traditional sweep and lock-down. The school is surrounded by police in the morning, who, at first bell, sweep everyone in the surrounding block into the school. Then the school is locked down. All inside are searched. Non-students, those with contraband, and others are taken to the central precinct -- where they are routinely released since the charges against them can never be upheld. The principal-professor promotes his methods, repeated now for three years, as the way to take control of an urban school.

The auditor of the former school board, in acknowledging that she could not count for up to three million dollars of board funds, finally admitted that she had not been the auditor at Northwest Airlines -- she was a clerk. After she resigned, she bought one of the most fashionable restaurants in Detroit. Once known as the Homeowner's City, with more single-family homes per-capita than any other, the city has bulldozed huge plots of land where housing once stood -- to the point that residents walking just a mile from the city center commonly kick up pheasants who have moved into the vacant fields. While unemployment levels in the city are two to three times those of the rest of the state, the state as a whole is experiencing remarkable growth and prosperity -- as is the U.S. Unlike the 1980's, when joblessness in Detroit exceeded 50%, most people now have jobs. The city school system is 90% black. Two-thirds of the children who enter DPS do not graduate. Prominent sociologists recognize Detroit as the most racially segregated city in the U.S. Most suburban white people never enter the city, except perhaps to see Detroit Tiger baseball or Red Wings hockey. Post-game, only a few fans

remain in town. Most flee home on expressways, known as the ditches, from which they see many burned-out buildings but few people. (Sugrue, 1997).

About five years ago, property values in the city bottomed out. GM, Ford, and speculators began to buy back what was once theirs -- including land on the priceless riverfront. Although Detroit residents voted repeatedly to oppose casinos in the city, the issue was placed on a state-wide ballot and passed. The mayor promised that the three casinos approved by the voters would never take up precious riverfront space. One \$200 million temporary casino was completed in two months and opened in July -- to lines of thousands of working people cuing in the heat. Two others will open before Y2K. All three casinos plan more swank permanent structures -- on the river front, as the mayor recently announced. The Lions and Tigers are completing new stadiums downtown as well. When asked where all the poor people who live near the new entertainment centers will move, an urban planner simply said, "Well, I certainly hope they leave." Once a proud urban center with hard-working blue-collar values, where the top hockey heroes were the "Production Line," the city now offers spectacles in place of production.

Many things happen first in Detroit. The 1929 depression began in the city. Because of the long dependence on industrial production, the impact of economic shifts are early and severe. Detroit was once a rowdy city, where honky-tonks, blues bars, rock and roll, all found a home on the streets, and in the plants. Now, perhaps leading the nation, Detroit is commodifying and constraining what was once the margins -- and giving the citizens a healthy dose of authoritarianism at the same time. The casinos, gambling centers, promote themselves as family entertainment centers, replacing the back-room card games -- and the music that fronted for them in all-night bars. Prostitution is moved off the streets, into trendy counter-culture newspapers, into the casinos, and into burgeoning strip joints surrounding the city. The suburban voters who thought they could locate gambling and immorality in Detroit alone are finding their daughters turned into dancers. An annual Woodward Dream Cruise is designed as a nostalgic look back at 1950's cruising of the street that Life once called the "Longest Unrecognized Drag-way in the World." It was a cite of kids fighting cops, night after night, for their right to enjoy cars, sex, and rock and roll. In July, 1999, more than 1.2 million auto fans showed up for the Fifth Dream Cruise. Five thousand cops around the state were put on alert to deal with the potential riotous nature of the aging white dream cruisers. Hundreds of them shut down Woodward at 9:30, threatening anyone walking on nearby sidewalks with arrest, simply because "Too many people are here." This, like most city cultural events -- and churches -- is profoundly segregated

Detroit is being reclaimed by elites who have no desire for an integrated, critical, authentic school system. While they recognize the need for multi-culturalism in their own ranks, they are keen to maintain a system of segregation among other classes. The state standardized tests for school kids measure, solely, parental income and race. The tests are used, along with geographic housing

choices made by racist parents, to deepen segregation, not enliven education. In seizing the form of education, the school buildings, and the content, the curricula, wealth seeks to stratify not only children, but also educators, who eventually will be paid, through merit schemes, along the lines of the income of the parents of their kids.

What elites must have right now is social peace -- and that is why they seized the Detroit schools when they did. They are led by an organization called "New Detroit," formed by quaking corporate leaders in the midst of the 1967 rebellion, whose director, Bill Beckham, is the key leader of the Takeover Board. Beckham, a former mayoral aide, is acutely aware that conditions in Detroit mirror conditions in the summer of 1967: hatred for the police, high expectations contradicted by minimal real-life possibilities, a community acting on gossip and tabloid TV news since a boycott of the scab papers is still 40% effective, and contempt for what is traditionally a center of hope -- school. The 1967 uprising was only quelled by military intervention including troops returned from Vietnam. It was a terrible setback for elites everywhere -- and a material boon to local citizens who gained nearly 100,000 jobs within six months of the rebellion. Strict welfare restrictions were quickly dropped and caseloads exploded. The carrot briefly replaced the stick. But the "Renaissance," of Detroit, declared thirty years ago but never realized, is now a Ponzi scheme, based on the faith of wealthy investors believing that their money will not vanish in a wave of class or race violence.

In order to gain social peace, vital to winning the failed bets of suburban gamblers taking the chance of entering the city (the photo of one horrified suburbanite running from an urban insurrection would destroy downtown investments for a long time to come), elites had to hold out a believable carrot -- schools that work. They wiped out the existing board, which was traditionally corrupt and incompetent, going back to the 1920's, and set out on a reform program which sees parents, teachers, and kids as the source of most of the school's problems -- as Adamany's program demonstrates. Remarkably, the old board had adopted a carbon-copy plan, days before they were abolished. As proof of the old board's political bankruptcy, only a handful of people protested their removal. The Takeover Board moved swiftly to smash any potential opposition. Massive police presence at early meetings drove away many parents and students. They opened the district treasury to make repairs in schools all across the district, and succeeded in at least 4/5 of them. Days before school opened, they flooded radio stations with announcements of a huge "Back to School Rally" with parents and kids invited to each school. They were also ordered to attend, and told that anyone not at school the first day would have to repeat a long registration process. Many saw this as an effort to limit the potential of a DFT job action by raising parental hopes -- and fears.

There are serious problems inside the DFT. The union leadership has long been profoundly alienated from the rank and file. The leaders are widely seen as

incompetent and corrupt -- on the other side. In midsummer, DFT president Elliot was asked how many days teachers teach in the school year. He guessed wrong, by ten days. Elliot has never led a serious job action, other than a brief strike in 1992, nor have his cohorts. In meetings to report the results of bargaining for the last two DFT contracts, Elliot declared voice votes which clearly opposed his positions, to be votes in favor of a return to work. The staff leadership of the AFT has very, very close ties to the UAW leaders who systematically sabotaged the rank and file and community action which could have led to a victory in the newspaper strike. Now, because they have been so separated from the members, the leadership has no idea of what it is they must bargain to gain member ratification -- except a clear message from the members that they do not like what the leaders have already done. Elliot was obviously shocked by the strike vote, as was Adamany. The union side has no plan for a long strike.

Opposition to Elliot, despite his claims and hints about outside agitators, is really small and not well organized. His perennial opponent, a high school teacher at the city's most prestigious school, has never been able to gain more than 40% of the vote in presidential elections, and there are no indications of extensive opposition organizing. The Trotskyist National Women's Rights Organizing Committee and the Columbus-based anarchist Anti-Racist Action group both have a tiny presence; neither could be considered influential now. The Rouge Forum has a small presence among teachers and parents. In sum, the teacher side has a serious problem with leadership -- and the feelings of the rank and file are hard to gauge. The DFT did no extensive bargaining survey, asking teachers what they wanted, before bargaining began.

While no one has a clear count, it appeared that the meeting on August 30, consisting of only about 1/3 of Detroit teachers, was heavy with voters from high schools, typically centers of greater militance. The key to a successful strike of this size is not the high schools but the elementary schools, critical to companies and parents as a source of free baby sitting. High school students can take care of themselves; grade school students cannot. Without a good base of elementary school educator support, the strike could unravel.

No one knows the feelings of the nearly 1,000 teachers the district hired in special hiring fairs in the summer of 1999. I was not able to locate a single new teacher on the picket lines. NEA and AFT research clearly says that new young teachers are far less likely to support union action than their colleagues who were hired in the late 1960's and early 1970's.

Moreover, the union has nearly no base in the community. No one from DFT organized parents or kids over the long summer vacation. The Board received heavy, congratulatory, press coverage for the school repair program. City schools have suffered from a bad reputation for years, much of it deserved. The schools are one of several reasons -- the most important being systematized racism -- that the city went from a population of about two million to less than one million

today. About one-half of Detroit public schools were built before 1930, about one fourth before 1920. Eighty-three schools, in the spring, were still heated by coal furnaces, leading to rates of asthma among staff and children over 70%. Class size is, on paper, often outrageous, over 40, but the district counts on truancy to offset what would otherwise be a crisis of space. The DFT has repeatedly taken extra pay for teachers in larger classes, rather than placing a strict cap on class size, and in this and in many other instances is seen by community people as a privileged force in their midst -- living well at the expense of community people. Very few teachers live in the communities where they teach, in fact, only a minority of them live in Detroit -- and fewer still have children in Detroit schools.

The DFT has another problem: they supported the Takeover Board, and nearly all of the principles the board adopted, from standardized tests to harsh discipline to "every student in a uniform," to site-based management and a "partnership" between the union and management. The partnership idea has origins in Detroit, with the UAW's father-son duo, Irving and Barry Bluestone. Irving was a professional anti- communist who helped lend an intellectual panache to Water Reuther's racist slate controlling the union. Later, son Barry, an Ivy-League economist, enunciated the necessity for labor/management/government partnerships, taking the lead from Mussolini. Bluestone is now very close to the NEA's president, Bob Chase, whose policies of "New Unionsim" mimic Bluestone, and the AFT's boss, Sandra Feldman, carrying on a tradition begun by the deceased reactionary, Albert Shanker, a father of the union concession movement in the 1970's, and one of the early boosters of the idea that the working class and the owning class have everything in common. Detroiters have lived the partnership notion in their unions, and have become the worse for it. Many people see this school reform as a partnership against them. The DFT, having slept with the Takeover Board, lacks a moral ground for a fight (Hill, 1997).

Neither the union nor the Takeover Board has any plan to deal with the key problem in Detroit's schools: the deep racist poverty that has overwhelmed the city in the last forty years. As Jean Anyon has shown, doing school reform without radically changing economic oppression is like washing the air on one side of a screen door. In this fuller context, it is not possible to address the takeover of the schools without considering the construction of fascism, on a slow, ugly, day by day pace (Anyon, 1997).

With no organization, no history of serious battles, no base among parents, kids, or workers in the community, the DFT leadership appears to be in big trouble -- and they are. But they remain in charge as long as the mind set of the rank and file and the community remains mired in the narrow history of unionism-- which has historically divided more people than united them -- and as long as the rank and file unconsciously chooses to let the leadership remain in charge. While it is most likely that this strike will be sold out, there are some clear actions rank and file activists might take. The crux of this, though, is that the union leadership must be superceded, and this process begins by declaring and

making them irrelevant -- and taking power from them when it is necessary. The principles which drive this should be equality and democracy, at every turn.

Both the Takeover Board members and the DFT union leaders were genuinely shocked at the vote of the educators in Cobo Hall. Neither group had contingency plans in the case of failure. Adamany believed Elliot could deliver. Elliot thought he knew what his members wanted, and would tolerate. They were wrong. Now the situation is, at least temporarily, out of their control.

Those who see schools as vehicles for social change -- for democracy and equality -- need to move quickly to unite the community and educators against the wealthy and privileged few who now run the schools, and the many who follow their directions. The issue: Whose Side Are You On? This can be achieved, within the confines of the union, by elevating demands which naturally unite parents, kids, and school workers -- like class size, academic freedom, a more just tax system, more equitable pay schedules, and integrated inclusive schools. At the same time, Freedom Schools could be established, schools set up in local facilities and people's homes which could take up their own curriculum -- like just who are these people on the school board and why do they act like this? Or, why is Detroit such a racist city? In other words, they could teach as many teachers believe they cannot, and both students and teachers would learn a lot.

A quick fix, and one is needed to inspire and carry forward the strike, would be for educators to march on the casino and shut it down -- and keep it shut. The casino is a weak link in the power of elites in Detroit, the cultural, economic, and the social pollution it engenders makes it a clear target-- and suburban gamblers do not want to face angry people as they wait patiently in line -- for the opportunity to lose. This is a move the city elites do not expect.

Longer term, rank and file notables need to assert their leadership of the strike -- by seeking to spread it. This involves appealing to rank and file members of other unions in the area, especially the militants in the MEA, who recognize the reality of the old union saw, "An injury to one only precedes an injury to all." No one should expect genuine support from other union bigwigs, especially those who wrecked the newspaper strike. The UAW big-cheeses are likely to feel they need to do nothing but plan for their strike at Chrysler, and Al Gore's election, but there are many UAW members who see otherwise -- and many former UAW members who are now motel clerks who might be mobilized in support. Michigan Education Association, the state's largest union by far, must be won to take action in support of the strike, from joining DFT picket lines to closing schools in the case of mass fines or firings aimed at Detroit. A general strike in Detroit is unlikely, especially since it will have to climb over the bodies of the moribund union bosses.

In the long run, the crux of the matter is to build an organization that understands that in order to make serious social change, to fight for democracy

and equality, it is necessary to organize people in new ways -- and to challenge the permanence of capital which today can only offer war, racism, organized social decay, meaningless spectacles, relentless surveillance, and jobs to people who look at others and think, "Sucker." Those of us working in schools, and attacking capitalism, are right on point. Everything is in place for social change -- except the decision to make it and the understanding of what that is.

To quote from a www-site of teacher organizing, "The Rouge Forum is a group of educators, students, and parents seeking a democratic society, concerned about questions like these: How can we teach against racism, national chauvinism and sexism in an increasingly authoritarian and undemocratic society? How can we gain enough real power to keep our ideals and still teach -- or learn? Whose interests shall school serve in a society that is ever more unequal? We are both research and action oriented. We want to learn about equality, democracy and social justice as we simultaneously struggle to bring into practice our present understanding of what that is. We seek to build a caring, inclusive community which understands that an injury to one is an injury to all. At the same time, our caring community is going to need to deal decisively with an opposition that is sometimes ruthless.

We hope to demonstrate that the power necessary to win greater democracy will likely rise out of an organization that unites people in new ways -- across union boundaries, across community lines, across the fences of race and sex/gender. We believe that good humor and friendships are a vital part of building this kind of organization, as important as theoretical clarity. Friendships allow us to understand that action always reveals errors -- the key way we learn.

There are no dues to join the Rouge Forum. Just email elethinker@geocities.com.

Day One of the Strike

Dear Friends,

The Detroit educator strike held firm today. Only 150 teachers, most of them new hires, crossed the picket lines, according to the administration's own reports. Bargaining ended tonight at 10 pm, with neither side reporting much progress. I interviewed one Takeover Board member, and 4 members of a Takeover Board advisory group, this evening. They made it clear that the union president, Elliot, is expected to regain control over his membership, and get a contract passed before Labor Day. Rank and file activist teachers in the Rouge Forum, and other groups in the city, are organizing to deepen the power of the strike, to appeal to other districts for help, and to organize freedom schools. Community centers in the city remain open as the strike goes on. The mayor cut short his vacation at Martha's Vineyard to return to give leadership to the management side. Messages of

solidarity to the teachers can be sent to the Rouge Forum at the site above. We will post those messages on a special page for the strikers. You can communicate with newspapers in the city electronically. Both city newspapers, the *Detroit News* and the *Free Press* (sic) are scab papers and subjects of a boycott, but striking press workers have agreed that the papers can be read, for free, online. Note that all of the coverage from these papers is, at best, second hand. They cannot get reporters into the union meetings. Many if not most strikers will not talk to them. Both papers editorialized, in clear terms, against the strike today. The *Detroit Free Press*, "The Freep," told DFT boss Elliot to take charge of his members and get on with the business of school reform.

Best,
Rich

Wednesday Update

Dear Friends,

The DPS strike held solid today. So few teachers are crossing lines that the administration stopped keeping a count. The *Detroit News*, in particular, ran vicious coverage against the strike, mis-characterizing what is really a great deal of parent and community support (unorganized and uncertain as it may be) as massive community anger against the teachers. The *News* and the electronic media began a red-baiting campaign, aimed at members of a dissident caucus, blaming them and outside agitators for the strike -- nonsense. All of the media are attacking the strike as a blow to Detroit, Michigan, public education, children, and working parents -- except the *NY Times*, which ran a remarkably sympathetic article.

Many different groups of teachers and parents are organizing in different ways. There is a demonstration scheduled by one group on Sunday at 3 at the school center building. There is a planning meeting scheduled for 3 at the Unitarian Church on Thursday.

The traditional Labor Day Festival, which has been stripped of any labor or political content by the AFI-CIO leadership, is set for Monday. So far, the AFL has not mobilized any support for the strike whatsoever.

The paragraphs below were sent to me today from a Rouge Forum member. Note that the teachers are on strike against, among other things, standardized exams.

We delivered our demands to Keith Johnson (a union staffer) as he was leaving the negotiations (in his tuxedo) for the dinner break. He said they had already agreed to reduce class size, remove any mention of merit pay and teachers will be transferred to other schools if their school is

"reconstituted" instead of the original language which ultimately left them without a job.

We are not happy with all that he told us but know that the few things we have gotten so far are because we didn't just walk back in as John Elliott wanted us to. We gave Johnson our list of demands and a group waited around to make sure that several other members of the negotiating team received them as they returned from dinner. I didn't wait around so don't know any more about this.

We are printing up copies of the demands as well as our own "hotline" about what we did and the responses to be passed out on picket lines throughout Detroit tomorrow. I am including below the list of demands as well as the wording on our petition.

***PRIORITY CONTRACT DEMANDS:
DEMANDS FOR IMPROVING SCHOOLS THROUGH POSITIVE
EDUCATIONAL REFORM***

- 1. Reduce class size to: K-3 - 20; 4-8 - 24; High school - 27; Special education by state mandate - 10.*
- 2. Provide adequate books, supplies, and physical education equipment, including:*
 - Two teacher manuals for every teacher;*
 - All students have required textbooks for every subject;*
 - A second set of textbooks for home use for all students from grade 4 through high school;*
 - Teacher access to copy machines in every school;*
 - Complete sets of science materials for all science teachers;*
 - Overhead projectors and screens for all classrooms;*
 - Computers in every classroom with software for attendance records and student grades;*
 - Internet access and e-mail capability;*
 - Committees of teachers the union committee in each school empowered to decide what supplies, books, and equipment are needed;*
 - Electrical outlets on every wall in every classroom;*
 - Bring all classrooms up to all applicable building codes.*
- 3. Restore diverse educational programs (music, the arts, shop, etc.).*
- 4. Recruit and retain Detroit teachers:*
 - a. Bring our salaries up to a level comparable to those of the surrounding Metropolitan Detroit school districts. Out of 85 school districts in the Detroit area, Detroit teachers ranks 73rd in pay rates.*
 - b. A strong seniority system. Eliminate any language that would cause teacher discipline or dismissal based on student achievement on standardized tests.*
 - c. No reconstitution of Detroit public schools.*

- d. No limitation on the use of sick, Family Leave, or personal leave time. Drop the proposed new attendance scheme.*
- e. No increase of the school working day. Restore prep time for teachers and student lunch and break times to enhance the quality of what students and teachers can do during the class day.*
- f. Actively recruit new certified and qualified Detroit teachers.*
- g. Eliminate duty periods.*
- 5. Full due process rights for teachers, including the right to appeal principals' decisions on disciplines and other matters.*
- 6. No reassignment of student grades by principals.*
- 7. No strings attached to additional salary steps or pay raises.*
- 8. Full and equal benefits and rights for all DFT members including: social workers, attendance agents, psychologists, teacher consultants, adult education teachers, teachers of the speech and language impaired and all ancillary staff; and recently hired employees.*
- 9. A minimum of one building substitute per 400 students.*
- 10. A daily prep for teachers.*
- 11. No restriction on qualification for movement on the salary schedule to Master's, Master's Plus 30, or Doctoral Schedules.*
- 12. A school library for every school with a librarian and computers with internet access. Fully stocked library with current materials.*
- 13. No so-called merit pay.*
- 14. No extension of the school day or school year beyond state requirements.*
- 15. No split classes.*

These demands were ratified in an open meeting of DFT members, parents, students, unionists, and community leaders who support the DFT strike to win quality education on September 1, 1999.

The petition reads as follows:

Petition in Support of the Strike to Win Quality Education

We, the undersigned teachers, students, parents and community members, support the just struggle of the Detroit Federation of Teachers for quality education and better working conditions. Together we demand, first and foremost, smaller class sizes, more and better books, supplies and equipment -- including computers -- the arts, music, and other diverse educational programs for the students and teachers of Detroit. We demand contract provisions for the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers,

including comparable wages with teachers in the Detroit metropolitan area. Only these measures can achieve quality education. We reject blaming teachers, students and parents for the problems caused by the neglect of public education in the city. We reject the attempt to stifle real education and teacher creativity through the increased use of and emphasis on standardized tests.

Best,
Rich

Thursday Update **Dear Friends,**

Classes were cancelled for Friday in the Detroit School strike. While hundreds of citizens, teachers, students, and community people are meeting around the city, and the strike appears strong, the AFL-AFT leadership moved to assert control of the strike -- to step in front of the rank and file.

At a rally in front of the city's symbol, a statue called the Spirit of Detroit, state AFL-CIO leadership joined a small rally of about 60 people, a coalition of non-teaching school personnel, to insist that they are behind the strike, and to issue their own demands.

The most numerous among the demonstrators was the Organization of Supervisory Staff, mid-level officials. Top district managers have them targeted as superfluous. The 11,000+ teacher bargaining unit is served by an 8-story building full of unionized administrators, some of them talented takers of lunch, others known to be dedicated professionals. They outlined demands like: support for more standardized exams and a common curriculum for all teachers, for grade retention, harsh truancy policies, and a cap on class size.

Joining them on the line was a handful of parents and school support personnel who did not speak. Steve Conn, a leader of a dissident faction, was denied an opportunity to announce a rally his group plans on Sunday at 3:00 at the School Center Building.

When I asked what the AFL will do if the Governor takes severe action against the strikers, the president of the state body announced that he would initiate "preventative legislative action." I asked the state AFL secretary treasurer if the group would call sympathy strikes when the legislative action fails, and she stated, "It is possible" that the AFL would call a general strike in Detroit. She said, "The rank and file has spoken in opposition to their leadership. But they are the beginning point of labor and we must back them up."

A rally is planned by the elected leadership of the DFT, and the AFT, on Friday morning at the school center building in Detroit. AFT head Sandra Feldman, a key proponent of the standardized testing movement, and a solid supporter of grade retention, is in town for the rally.

Rank and file strikers have made it clear that their key issue is class size, and they oppose punitive anti-student measures. The district claims poverty in response to the class size demand.

The media continues to focus on the need to open school immediately after Labor Day, apparently forgetting that Detroit schools were closed two weeks last winter due to a snowstorm. The city does not plow streets. The lost days were waived by the state.

Pickets at two elementary schools were robbed at gunpoint this morning. One striker claims she lost \$4,000 in jewelry.

Suburban teacher reaction appears mixed. Many teachers in the nearby suburbs either taught in Detroit, or have spouses there and support the job action. However, many other educators tell me that they were pleased by the takeover of the Detroit schools, and eager to see the city to start the year with refurbished orderly buildings. The leadership of the suburban Michigan Education Association has made no plans, as yet, to take action if Detroit teachers are penalized.

Letters of solidarity for the strikers can be emailed to me. They will be posted on the www site below as soon as possible. Thanks to those who have already written.

Best,
Rich

Friday Update
Dear Friends,

Between 5,000 and 6,000 education workers and their supporters, carrying signs and chanting demands like "Lower class size, books, and supplies!" marched the circumference of a huge city block around the Detroit School Center building early this morning. Four and five abreast, men and women, veteran teachers and school workers holding tiny babies, black and white, the demonstration was the high-water mark of the illegal and massive wildcat strike that has halted school in the 180,000-student district. The demonstration, on the central artery of the city, Woodward Avenue, was witnessed by thousands of commuters, many of them honking and waiving in support.

One teacher in a small meeting of educators said, "I was in the military for twenty years. When I was there, if an officer sent me on a mission and I discovered that I could not do it without more people or supplies, I either got what I needed or I did not take on the task -- and I made it clear why it was not done. I came here because I want to help kids where I came from. I sure as hell do not need the money. Most of the people here could make a helluva lot more in this economy. But this job is impossible. I have an average of 39 kids in my classes. In one small class, one of my kids got shot and killed a block from the school. So I surveyed the rest of them. Twenty-four of the 34 had been involved in a violent traumatic incident of some kind in the last year. That is day to day life here. We must have a reasonable cap on class size, or nobody could do this. And if it can't be done, why open the damn school?"

While caucuses around the city have given the DFT competing lists of demands, from opposition to standardized exams to calls for more standardization, it remains that the DFT leadership is unclear about exactly what it is, at minimum, that their members will tolerate.

A school secretary supporting the teachers on the picket line told me, "I send my kids to Detroit schools. Before that, they were in D.C. schools. I know something about horrible schools and bad teachers. But I support these people because I know some of them are trying to help my kids, and the rich folk on the board don't care if my babies eat."

AFT President Sandra Feldman flew into Detroit and spoke at the rally early in the morning. Most of the teachers who listened to her speech were impressed by her calls for solidarity. However, Feldman in a small press conference, said. "I support the concept of merit pay, as well as the standardization of the curriculum, but Adamany is just plain wrong in using this process to get it. He is going about this in the wrong way. The people must be involved."

Detroit is the most racially segregated city in the U.S. The teachers have made only small gains in crossing the racial-geographic divide, to gain support from other educators outside the city. A supportive suburban teacher says this: "I must say, at [my school] the strike is not only a Detroit thing, it is a non-issue. Surprise, surprise."

The rally achieved the goal of pulling many teachers back to supporting DFT president John Elliot. One high school teacher who spoke as he marched said, "I voted against Elliot in the president election -- twice. And I voted against the contract -- for this strike. But like they say, I can see that he is the only horse we have got, and we need to ride him for now. We need to support Elliot and the DFT. We know we can't win everything that is on the table. If we can't get class size, well then we need more money."

Yesterday afternoon, DFT supporters of John Elliot, discredited by his signature on a tentative agreement that was rejected by the rank and file, fanned out to most of the schools in the city with a message: "Do not accept leaflets or literature from anyone who is not from the Elliot side. Do not allow outsiders on your picket line." At one school, teachers were warned not to speak to supporters of Steve Conn, the dissident caucus leader who was instrumental in the rejection of the contract.

Both of the two caucuses which led the vote against the contract issued leaflets to the demonstrators today. One, the FEE (Fighting for Educational Excellence) detailed their support for Elliot and the bargaining team, and offered to put one person on the team, describing differences as a family squabble. The other, the Quality Education Committee led by Conn and members of the National Women's Rights Organizing Committee, underlined the strength of the strike, and victories already won: the longer work day with no boost in pay is off the bargaining table, and, on the other hand, Elliot is now saying that the DFT is standing firm on class size. From their leaflet: "Our strike has proven that fighting can win."

In a meeting of Conn's group, members discussed the need to fight against the possibility of another bad contract, and undemocratic procedures that might get it passed. Conn repeated his feeling that once that barrier is overcome, "We can win a real victory, a great contract." Others in the meeting disagreed, saying that it will take a lot more than that to win a great contract.

The Reverend David Murray, one of the elected board members whose job was abolished, declared, "God is on our side in this and thus we cannot lose."

People attending one caucus meeting told me that their numbers were cut in half from previous day, and attributed the loss to DFT pressure on members to stay away.

In a city where GM abrogated a contract with the UAW not long ago, where the entire elected school board was illegally abolished and replaced by representatives of the rich, any contract must be seen as a temporary truce, an ephemeral victory at best.

In the afternoon, Detroit's Mayor Dennis Archer directed the union and representatives of school CEO David Adamany to come to his office to bargain, and "bring your toothbrushes." The union side declined to come. Elliot's PR person pointed out that negotiations were already going on at that moment in the School Center Building. The little act of defiance could be part of Elliot's prearranged campaign to become believable, or it could be real contempt for the mayor who was letting Elliot swing in the wind. Elliot later agreed to around-the-clock bargaining, but not in the mayor's den. Early evening reports from the negotiations: "Nothing is happening." In contrast, a board bargainer said, "Expect an agreement Saturday."

There is growing media pressure, and pressure from the Governor's office and the Mayor's office, to, "Get this strike settled, done, finished, by Wednesday -- at the latest," according to a release from the mayor's office. People who want to impeach the mayor, led by a black multi-millionaire who was denied one of the three permits to open a Detroit casino, were prominent at the demonstration. The TV media moved coverage of the gigantic demonstration today to the back-burner, following stories about a big car wreck, the usual round of city shoot-outs, a minister who ate 12 BigWhops on a bet to get a pal to church, and a story about a local basketball star who urinated on the floor of a local restaurant, disturbing patrons. The march got seven seconds on one channel.

State legislators issued press releases threatening action against the strike late this evening. The existing law (see my [www](#) page) offers the legislature little or no leverage in this job action. At base, the only illegal strike is a strike that fails.

If nothing else, the strike is demonstrating the power of working people and the power of social practice. The theories of standardized testing are answered here -- in the streets. Nothing functions when workers simply say "No," and walk away. This demonstrates who it is that creates value, who can live without who. Even so, walking away is only part of the path to gaining control of the process and product of one's working life. Just saying NO, is only part of the way to empowerment. On the other hand, it is abundantly clear that the cutting-edge issue in this struggle is social class: rich vs all. Top leaders on all sides of the strike are drawn from the multi-cultural spectrum, which undoes the underlying premise of multi-culturalism: that we are all in this together. Even so, for working people, the impact of the strike is likely to demonstrate that an injury, or a victory, to one can precede the same for all.

Notes of support, etc. can be sent to the [www](#) site below. There are rallies scheduled for both Sunday and Monday in support of the strike.

Best,
Rich

Saturday Update
Dear Friends,

Negotiations for the Detroit Public School Strike took place for nearly eight hours today until, at about 9:45 p.m., bargainers for both sides chose to end the talks until noon, Sunday. Union bargainers indicated that at least one issue is completed, the hours of work. They said that the work day would remain the same, but that teachers would be teaching more. They declined to answer whether or not concessions have been made in teacher preparation time.

The DFT began to run a radio ad explaining the reasons for the strike this afternoon. A woman's voice says, "This strike is not merely about money or school reform. It is about whether or not teachers will be able to perform as professionals in the classrooms with your children."

She goes on to describe overcrowded classrooms, the lack of supplies, the absence of art and music classes, the difficulty of retaining good teachers in Detroit, etc.

It is a moving advertisement. Unfortunately, it did not run through the summer, to prepare the community for the struggle ahead. Now, in this context, it is at once a sophisticated appeal for community support and a prop for the discredited DFT president. The ad closes with her voice, "brought to you by Detroit Federation of Teachers President John Elliot."

The media began to sharpen its attack on the strike as well. The *Detroit Free Press* ran an article suggesting that Jesus would cross the picket lines. WWJ radio, a 24-hour news station with the top arbitron ratings in the city, ran an interview with a professor from the Michigan State University school of industrial relations. The authoritative expert said teachers will begin to be fined early next week. In addition, he suggests that the union could expect especially heavy fines, and perhaps jail for its leaders. Finally, he said all of the teachers may be "fired, as were the teachers in the Crestwood district 15 years ago, and not one of them got their jobs back."

The 1994 Michigan law (see the DPS section on the www site below) allows for fines, not dismissals. The union may not be fined at all. The Crestwood strike, an MEA district, took place almost 20 years ago. It is correct to say that the teachers were fired and never returned. The little district employed less than 400 teachers. They struck, against an injunction, early in the fall. Their strike was solid. They had massive support from the community. Dozens of unions, and hundreds of people, joined them on the picket lines. Management brought in scabs, initially escorted through the lines by a phalanx of city and state police. Rank and file members decided to stop the scabs and, early in the strike, closed the picket lines to the cops and the scabs. On the second day, about 20 people were arrested. But the lines held firm.

MEA panicked. The leadership decided to request that community support come to an end, and told the strikers that the association would file legal challenges that would prevail. MEA actively disorganized the teachers' picket lines and sent militants home. The MEA legal challenges failed in the courts. Not one teacher who followed this path got their job back, and few of them taught again in Michigan. The lesson that every MEA staff person took from this experience was that the law was merely a weapon of dominance, and that future strikes would have to be more, not less militant. A later strike, led by the MEA in River Rouge, saw the district repeat the threat to bring in scabs and to fire

educators. Teachers, knowing it is difficult to defend picket lines which must stretch around wide school boundaries, seized the school buildings, sat in, and won.

It is not the law, but political reality that defines the legality of a strike. Michigan educators have been involved in hundreds of strikes all over the state. Every teacher strike broke the law. In the strikes that won, and nearly everyone did, the law was circumvented by both labor and management by calling the strike a "job action," often one against unfair labor practices. The issue was lifted out of the courts by power, not legal debate.

Schools of Industrial Relations, and Labor Studies, are often the most politicized section of a campus. On the management side, well, the professors are on the management side. In labor schools, professors, even tenured professors, frequently see themselves as dependent on the labor movement, the top AFL-CIO leadership, for students, money, and other forms of support. The Michigan State professor, introduced as an expert on industrial relations, rises out of a mire of servility.

This is Labor Day weekend. In Detroit, where 100,000 people once marched down Woodward Avenue, the main artery, in support of communist-led union action at Ford Motors, working people are offered up an endless round of spectacles: a jazz festival, a boogie festival, a state fair (costing \$20 to enter); all veritable eat-a-thons encouraging the most passive forms of consumption, fun becoming a spectator event. The cultural events, in contrast to most of day to day city life, are reasonably integrated.

The Ford Rouge Plant once employed more than one hundred thousand workers, making from scratch everything that went onto a car, iron to glass. Now less than 9,000 people work there. The prime growth industry in Michigan is prison and surveillance. Jails derange the landscape all over what was once the lovely north of the state, covered by white pines. In Grand Rapids, furniture factories are moved inside the prisons, where the managers appreciate the attendance of the workers. Privatized prisons make each inmate a source of profit, belying the apparent contradictions of school and jail spending. Education is a loss. Jail is a profit. Simple. Schools in Detroit are huge markets for the surveillance industry, cameras to metal detectors, to private guards.

Besides jail, the key industry is the spectacle: Casinos, strip-joints, Tough Man contests, which treat people as a double object, a source of profit, a mindless consumer. The largesse of the richest society in the history of the world makes it possible for dominance to discover, and offer up, the most base desire of each potentially privileged citizen, and to simultaneously suggest penalties for resistance. In this, educators face a difficult series of choices of paths.

The annual Labor Day parade, once a huge militant march topped by fervent speeches in what is now Kennedy Square (named after he spoke on Labor Day), is now a Labor Fest, absent the speakers and debates that the AFL-CIO leadership claims no one wants to hear. The fest offers music, food, beer, and promises, in its literature, "No rhetoric."

This year, the on-strike DFT will lead the parade. For the last three years, the gathering has been led by hundreds of Detroit newspaper strikers who lost their jobs when the powerful UAW and the Teamsters betrayed them, urging court action in place of massive community militance on picket lines, going so far as to identify disruptive picketers to the police.

The only leaflet the DFT has issued during the strike closes with this slogan in bold print: The Union United Cannot be Defeated.

It can. But not if the rank and file, united with the community, fighting racism above all, can take direct action to control the work place, and to move beyond the workplace to the key sectors of the community. The rank and file activists promise an active presence at the Fest.

Please circulate this piece and the url below. Happy Labor Day.

Best,
Rich

Sunday Update **Dear Friends,**

Five years ago, Detroit voters passed a billion-dollar bond issue to fund school repairs. For four years, the elected school board bickered about how the money would be spent, and spent a little of it. But most of the money sat fallow. The schools remained in disrepair. Many elementary teachers taught for months in heavy coats because there was no heat -- and no windows. Many citizens believed the board was fighting over who would get what kickback from who, whose relatives would get the jobs. Suburbanites, usually in conversations coded with comments about the "inner city," offered the schools as proof that black people could not govern themselves, forgetting that the Detroit School Board has been notoriously corrupt, and white, for nearly a century. In the early 1900's Detroit Mayor Hazen Pingree had the entire school board arrested because, "I bribed you last night, and now I have discovered you took a bigger bribe. So, you are arrested for not staying bribed."

Using low test scores and the unspent bond money as excuses, Governor Engler seized the schools and abolished the elected board early this year. He ordered Detroit Mayor Archer to appoint the new board, but Engler kept one

appointee, who has full veto power, as his own. Archer appointed representatives of the rich, a V.P. for marketing from Daimler-Chrysler, the head of the local corporate community, and five others. The board hired a CEO, David Adamany, the ex-president of Wayne State, who is responsible for the daily operations of the schools. Adamany left his last job under a cloud, a huge faculty vote of no-confidence, following years of efforts to destroy the campus unions.

The Detroit Federation of Teachers supported every aspect of the takeover.

Adamany moved quickly to abolish the unions in DPS, construction unions, administrator unions, etc., suggesting that the people on the school payroll were culturally poisoned, unable to work. At one school board meeting, 150 repair people appeared with the leader of their union. The spoke respectfully, earnestly: "We want to work. We are good workers. We have kept the 80-year-old boilers in the furnaces going with no parts. We spent our own money to keep the kids and teachers warm. You wonder why it is so hard to get repairs made in the system? There is one truck for all of us." Adamany has not succeeded in removing one union from the system.

Adamany hired a democratic party pal to spend the bond money and repair the schools this summer. DPS trades workers had to bid on the jobs. Many of the schools are indeed repaired, shiny floors, new windows, working bathrooms. Some are not. Mayor Archer talks about the "euphoria, the enthusiasm, the sensation, of the building project, which was all there to open the schools." Now he feels teachers, acting in an illegal strike, spoiled the party.

Today, at a demonstration of about 150 educators, parents, kids, nurses, professors, and other workers around the city, one teacher stepped forward to say, "Sure, the buildings are important. But the people are more important, and education isn't just a building. We have many schools in this system that don't have books, don't have libraries, don't have functional computers, hell they don't have phones."

Another teacher from a middle school said, "We don't have supplies, and our students cannot get the help they need in classes of 43. What would Birmingham people do if the Governor stole their schools? What would you do? He says this strike is illegal. Well, the new board is illegal -- and so is that dictator Adamany."

The demonstrators rallied in front of the school center building, site of negotiations for the DPS contract. At 9:30 p.m., negotiators from both sides halted talks until tomorrow. Both sides reported a great deal of progress, having "exchanged final packages."

A union bargainer suggested that the DFT may go to its members on Tuesday to seek a motion to return to work, "since this contract is so close," and then conduct a mail ballot ratification vote when a tentative agreement is reached. A

leader of a dissident caucus said, "This is a double peculiarity. They cannot be so stupid as to think we are going back to work without a contract on their promise. We all saw them lying to us just last week. Beside that, what's up with the DFT suddenly supporting a secret ballot? They never use the secret ballot, because it would allow people to vote against the people who run the union. But now they want it because they are scared the members would shout this double-talk down again."

George Washington, a prominent Detroit radical labor lawyer, said, "These Republicans think they can seize the schools and smash this strike. Well, we will have an injunction against that in a minute."

The Rev. David Murray, a former DPS elected board member, speaking to the demonstrators, said, "This is a Caucasian plot to take over Detroit, and the Caucasian people working in the middle of it will have to pay the price." His comments were highlighted in the electronic media reports tonight.

One teacher watching the demonstration from across the street commented, "It is wealth, Democratic, Republican, casino wealth, dollar wealth holding up the city. We showed them their money is worth nothing when we shut the schools together."

While the strikers rallied, Vice-President Al Gore and AFL-CIO President John Sweeney visited the city. Gore spoke to an audience of 200 mostly white labor leaders in Central Methodist Church, then went on to address the 800 mostly black parishioners of Sacred Heart. Gore was introduced by Sweeney as a man seeking to link churches and labor in a "faith and justice," campaign. Gore spoke heartily in opposition to "replacement workers taking the jobs of working people on strike." Neither Sweeney nor Gore mentioned the ongoing Detroit teacher strike.

The Labor Fest sponsored by the AFL on Monday is threatened by rain.

Best,
Rich

**Monday evening,
Dear Friends,**

The Labor Fest in Detroit doubled in size this year. While the police estimate of 10,000 marchers would be a step up from previous years, UAW organizers guessed attendance at over 20,000. Unionists marched under cloudy skies, in 85-degree heat. Showers predicted for the day held off until late afternoon, then leaky roofs flooded and closed Detroit Metro Airport, voted by travelers as the worst in the U.S.

Marchers were to be led by the striking members of the Detroit Federation of Teachers. Not long into the march, a contingent of about 50 people supporting a local Democratic political contender leaped into the head of the parade. The Democrats were joined by Detroit Mayor Archer, bitter opponent of the teacher strike, who said his prayers are with all workers.

The spirited DFT contingent was fully integrated, black, Hispanic, and white, young and old, an unusual crowd of 2,000 educators in an AFL-CIO procession overwhelmingly dominated by white people, reflective of the union movement itself, especially the building and construction trades. The educators chanted their familiar, "Books! Supplies! Lower Class Size!"

The marchers traveled down two routes, the primary route running south down Woodward Avenue, the largest street in the city. They walked past the Detroit Medical Center, a thriving adjunct of Wayne State University, an addition that overwhelmed its parent. The medical center now houses over one-half of the WSU staff. The center is in the midst of what was once one of the poorest areas of Detroit, not too far from the Brewster Douglas projects, birthplace of the Supremes. Thousands of poor people were displaced by WSU reclamation projects, organized by then-WSU president David Adamany, now the CEO of Detroit schools. The demonstrators walked along a route that once was traveled by electric trolley cars, a smoke-free-energy-efficient system that traversed the whole city -- until GM bought it up, sold it to Mexico City, and tore down the wires that gave it power.

Leaving the medical center, marchers passed the boarded-up blue hulk of a building that was once Motown, passed dozens of derelict, boarded buildings much like it, passed the huge vacant lots, bulldozed terrain, that typify the wreckage of the most segregated city in the U.S., and passed the rising framework of Comerica Stadium (the owners promised to call it Tiger Stadium when they asked for tax money), that symbolizes the new era of Detroit, an entertainment and gambling center, not the Arsenal of Democracy.

Labor Fest was all that is the labor movement today. Dozens of UAW locals joined in, most of them with symbols of their partnerships with their employers. GM, Chrysler, Ford, all made donations of huge 18-wheel display trucks, dozens of late-model cars, trinkets like frisbees and candy (stamped with "UAW-FORD Partners in Production"). No one talked about the massive explosion that murdered workers at the Ford Rouge Plant early in the year. Marching with special verve were members of the "UAW-Ford Team" who are about to lose their jobs because they work in supplier plants that will be spun-off, detached from Ford and left to fend for themselves for wages and benefits, as were the GM parts Teammates in 1998.

Trades workers came riding their employers' gigantic construction machines. The union coalition of the Teamsters, UAW, and the Hotel Workers that

represents workers in Detroit's new casinos, voluntarily recognized by their employers, had a booth. The Christian unionists were widely represented. The UAW has a Union Chaplaincy program, and a booth for recruiting. UAW Local 51 carried a yellow banner, "Youth Shooting Rockets for Christ," carried by young men and women, marching in cadence, in camouflage outfits. This seems to reflect Al Gore's campaign to unite Christians and trade unions.

The union representing Detroit and state police had recruiting literature there, as did the prison guards. The largest UAW local in the state of Michigan, the state workers union local 6000, had less than a dozen members present. The UAW is opposing their efforts to place the question of collective bargaining for their members on a state-wide ballot -- it would be bad for Al Gore to have to deal with it.

Relatively privileged among the world's workers, often willing to seek gain at their expense, even at the expense of other workers in their ranks, labor as it is contained in the AFL-CIO demonstrated all of its strengths and weaknesses on the streets today: able to shut down the 180,000-student school system, unable to produce a single speech or flyer in support.

The march lasted more than two hours, culminating in a cultural fair next to the gigantic hole that was once Detroit's premier department store, Hudson's, imploded by dynamite not long ago. Just as the march concluded, around noon, negotiations for the Detroit school strike resumed.

The key issue of this strike, usually unnoticed and unspoken, is social control. In a society that is more and more inequitable, it is important for elites to mask the existence and creation of inequality, and to use age old methods like divide-and-conquer, reward-and-punish, to keep the bottom of the pyramid in place. Clear geographic boundaries separate citizens by class and race -- as do the scores on standardized tests. The standardized tests measure levels of apartheid, seek to regulate what is known and how it is to be evaluated, promote nationalism, alienate teachers, students and parents, and occlude the workings of the capitalist market, making them unthinkable. The deep mind-body division of labor that the tests represent is the focal point of ongoing teacher-led struggle, much of it originating in the Rouge Forum in Michigan.

Wealth allowed Detroit to go to seed, to rot, while its citizens, surviving twenty years of massive unemployment, tore the floorboards from homes to build fires for heat, stripped houses of plumbing to sell for scrap, and watched as corrupt agencies like HUD gave loans to realtors, who absconded with the funds. After the 1967 Detroit rebellion, welfare restrictions were quickly allayed, caseloads rose. But as militancy faded in the economic crises of the late 1970's, welfare cuts became popular. At one point, the state of Michigan and the federal government gave Chrysler and Lee Iacoca 1 billion dollars to bail out his company. Welfare grants were slashed the same day. Every mental hospital but

one in the state was closed. Prisons replaced them. Chrysler later sold itself to Germany.

Recently, with property values bottomed out, the rich came back, bought property, put in their casinos as places to play. They know their grip on the city is tenuous. Detroit is a city with a long history of race and class violence. Uprisings of any kind could ruin investments. The people most likely to participate in social upheavals are young people, and they are in school. But their schools have been harshly neglected. There is little offer of hope from a Detroit school. So it is imperative to reclaim the schools, and, within this project, to segment the population even further, with scalpel precision, along fairly predictable lines of who will wind up where in the social system -- to hold out hope, false and real, against the possibility of serious resistance to inequality.

In this context, the teacher strike is a real blow against the empire, against the social control that is enforced by legality and propriety, against union leaders who do not represent, but want to discipline, their members, against a ferocious campaign to enforce the notion that school reform is about a standardized curricula, kids in uniform, and attacks on parents. They struck against a culture and its media that says you cannot fight city hall and win, and besides there are many other more fun things to do -- shop. The teachers have repeatedly said this strike is about "Class size, books, and supplies!" and while there is some question about what they will trade off in salaries to get that, there are many teachers who are committed to their students and their community. One teacher marching in Labor Fest told me, "Up until now, the conservative element in the union was elementary teachers. Well now they are sick of it. They are mad as hell and they will not take any more. They have been sacrificing and patient and now they are set up as the problem. Well they are not the problem, and they are out of control. They mean what they say. They love those kids. You must know what a mad elementary teacher can get when she wants it. They are not going to quit." Social control meets Ms Chips, who loves her children.

Negotiators announced a press conference for 7:00 p.m. DFT President Elliot would speak. Another marching teacher told me today, "The wraps are off Elliot. We have protected him too long. He is plain stupid and plain on the wrong side. He is done and we are done with him." Another teacher, though, an old Detroit radical, said, "No, he is dumb, but he plays to these teachers. He fools with their feelings for others. He gets up and cries. That's how he sold the last lousy contract -- and they ALL have been lousy."

Elliot did not appear until after 8:00. Part of the delay was caused by Detroit school Security Squads who removed about 30 teachers from the area near the press conference. Locked out, held back by a large iron gate, they denounced the secrecy of proceedings inside.

Elliot came to the mike and appeared at a loss. He announced a Tentative Agreement, saying there would be mail ballots sent to teachers soon. Ballots would be counted in "a couple weeks." Prompted by reporters' questions, he apparently remembered he would call a membership meeting, as is DFT tradition, to vote on a back-to-work decision. He became clear, however, that there will be two votes, one on Wednesday morning to determine the back-to-work issue, another mail ballot to decide on the TA. No copies of the agreement were available. Elliot said, "some copies" will be available for teachers on Wednesday.

What is in the contract? Union spokespersons said different things to different observers. There is consensus that this is a three-year contract. To one TV station, DFT reported a 6% to 12% raise. To my phone call, they said a 4% raise, which they repeated to another TV station. They said 22 schools could be effected by a class size cap in the 2000-2001 school year. They agreed that they made concessions on teacher sick days, moving from 15 to 8, unless the teacher supplies written excuses. Any excess of 8 means a loss of the next year's raises -- and potential discipline. Elliot said, "Merit pay is not covered in the formal contract." Just what kind of contract it may be covered by is unclear. It is rumored that one issue is headed for arbitration. The popular demands for books and supplies, a library in every school, do not appear to be addressed at all.

After a tired and clearly dispirited Elliot had walked away, CEO Adamany took a spritely jump to the microphones. He denounced the strike, saying, "This cost my district and the city of Detroit millions of dollars. It was absolutely unnecessary. See, we had an agreement for a ten-day extension, and we reached this new agreement in seven days. This should never have happened to the union leadership or to the city schools."

Adamany went on to say that DPS strikers could still be fined \$500 dollars for every day they were off the job, under state law.

Following his ouster from his job as President at Wayne State, Adamany became the head of the State Civil Service Commission which oversees all of the classified state employees in Michigan. The Commission has remarkable powers, including the power to overturn arbitration decisions and to approve all contracts with the employees' unions which do not have collective bargaining rights. During his tenure at the CSC, Adamany led moves to negate all of the non-economic provisions of the state employee contracts that were negotiated in the previous year. For Adamany, history suggests a deal is not a deal.

Best,
Rich

**Tuesday Update,
Dear Friends,**

The DPS strike remains active and solid. Despite reports of a tentative agreement which many thought would end teacher picketing at schools, every facility was still lined with picketers on the neighboring sidewalks -- even the elementary schools.

Very few people have seen the tentative agreement signed by DFT President John Elliot and DPS CEO David Adamany. Some favored reporters have been provided courtesy copies, but the DFT has not circulated them to the membership as yet. Unfortunately, only a few of the local reporters have the background to read and comprehend an education contract. Their interpretations are confused and murky.

It is critical to underscore the fact that one thing this strike has shown is the incredible power of united parents, students and educators. The key demands, class size, books, academic freedom, are demands that have made the continued strike possible -- by uplifting that unity. This solidarity, which united rank and file people across the spectrum, also made it clear that the union bureaucracy and many arrogant managers can be made irrelevant. Now, when push comes to shove, the people of Detroit will be looking at teachers and wondering if they are willing to sell things they called principles for a few percentages on a salary scale.

Educators should note that pay is not primarily related to the number of years in a district, the number of degrees, or merit. Teacher pay and benefits, first of all, are linked to the needs of the community, and to the power of teachers to fight. You don't get more because you have an MA plus 30. Ask the teachers in Colorado. You get more because you are organized.

Let us look at the voting process. Educators will vote at Cobo Hall in a meeting that begins at 9:00 a.m. on Wednesday. The vote, according to DFT leadership, will be on whether or not to return to work. Then, later, using a mail ballot, teachers will vote up or down on the tentative contract. On the face of it, this makes no sense. Why have two votes when DFT has traditionally voted on contracts, usually by voice vote, in mass meetings? Why not just vote on the contract itself?

One veteran union organizer I know, a professional with the National Education Association whose job is to watch the AFT, said this:

Well, keep in mind that the leadership of the DFT has bungled everything they touched for some time, so to attribute a thoughtful plot to them may be a bit too much, but remember that some top AFT staff are in Detroit now, so here is what I think they may be doing. There are two questions in a vote like this: the substance of

the contract and the opposition leadership. If the contract is good, it will sell itself. I think this is one that needs to be sold -- hard. So, DFT leaders believe they may lose any public membership vote, simply because they know that Elliot may not match be able to wits with the many dissident teachers. On the other hand, they may believe their own propaganda, that only a tiny minority of the teachers started this strike, and thus they will win the vote hands down.

Now, if they win that first vote, they're in good shape. They can call for a vote on the contract right away, or they can go ahead and do that mail ballot. If they lose the first vote, then they can allow the strike to continue, knowing that they will do the counting when the mail ballots are returned. The AFT does not do ballots supervised by the American Arbitration Association. Even so, this really makes no sense. I hope the members at least make them work this voting process out.

The substance of the contract is still unclear, although members will have to vote very soon, and the rank and file distrusts the DFT. DFT members I have interviewed feel they have not been told the truth about previous contracts, and they do not trust John Elliot to count fairly in a vote, mail ballot or voice vote.

DFT bargainers say the new three-year contract brings Detroit teachers close the surrounding suburbs in pay. This is most unlikely. The average top-of-the-scale teacher with an M.A. in nearby working-class suburbs makes an average of \$12,000 a year more than Detroit teachers. Over the course of a career, the racist pay differential amounts to the cost of a lovely home -- paid for. The DFT claims that it has won a raise of 4% per year for top scale teachers. The math does not work.

DFT says part of the raise comes to teachers at the top of the scale, who are rewarded at double the level of entry level teachers. There are several problems with this: The multi-tiered salary schedule divides the union, wrecks solidarity. In this contract, for example, union bosses and management were able to locate, on the salary schedule, where the majority of teachers are, and to reward a number of them, at the expense of the rest. Over time, this will erode solidarity, hence eroding wages. Of course, entry level teachers will be, at least, annoyed. They are not likely to see, either, that raising the number of steps on a salary scale simply extends the time it takes to reach the top, thus slashing income over a career. The guiding principles for the union, in every action, should be equality and democracy, as the bedrock of democracy.

The average Detroit elementary classroom holds between 35 and 42 kids, depending on the area of the city. The average working class suburban elementary school has class sizes at 23, and the suburbs are making serious efforts to get this

down to 20. DFT says that it has made improvements on class size, but they do not come into effect until next year, and they only cover about 12% of the schools in the Detroit system. What happens to the rest?

There have been no reports of guarantees for books, a library in each school, or supplies. Nor does there appear to be language about protections against school reconstitution, closing schools and firing teachers where kids have low test scores. There are no reports about language protecting teachers from involuntary transfers, no language guaranteeing seniority on voluntary transfers.

DFT admits concessions were made on sick leave, requiring written excuses after 8 days -- in practice probably reducing the real usable sick days to 8.

The district initially sought to extend the teacher work day by 1 hour. DFT says they defeated this demand. But DFT does not say whether or not they have allowed the district to reduce planning time.

DFT says they defeated merit pay, but David Adamany claims that he can use the state legislature and the law to get what he wants in this area anyway. DFT makes no statement about protection from merit pay. The union says one section of the contract may go to arbitration. This could be it. Other rumors suggest that elementary planning time is the subject of further litigation.

Both Dr Adamany and John Elliot said today that this contract contains nothing that would not be there if the strike had not happened. Both blamed the strike on a tiny minority of the Detroit teachers who somehow bamboozled the others to hit the bricks. My experience suggests neither statement is true.

Meanwhile, the media is urging teachers to come to the meeting on Wednesday, suggesting, with Adamany, that the vote last time was manipulated. David Jaye, a state legislature from a racist working-class district that prides itself on Reagan Republicanism, says he will take action in Lansing to fine every teacher who has been on strike -- \$500 a day. Adamany says he may approve of Jaye's plan. Adamany and Jaye agree that teachers in other districts could look at this strike and conclude the law is impotent against united educators. I counted five suburban teachers on the Labor Fest march yesterday. Clearly, they have not learned that an injury to one really does precede an injury to all.

What will happen if the teachers vote no? They will come under a much sharper attack. It is reasonable to say the Governor, the state legislature, and the bosses of their own union, will all join the assault. At this point, the struggle will become much sharper, and more will be demanded of teachers who are sincere about serving their students, fighting for lower class size, libraries, books and supplies. While the old DFT leadership will be swept aside in theory, it will need to be done in practice. The old tactics, pickets around buildings, will need to be replaced with real base-building: door to door appeals throughout the community,

explaining the strike in coffee clatches and small group community meetings. The spectacles of huge demonstrations at the school center building, primarily tests of internal union strength as well as a way to seek publicity, will have to be supplemented by actions which will not merely be symbolic, but as threatening to management as an injunction is to strikers. This is where creative demonstrations, say at the casinos, might come into play. At the same time, teachers could establish Strike Freedom Schools where they could teach in ways they cannot teach in their own schools. Finally, teachers, parents, community people, and students need to build an organization, existing both within and outside the union, where they build mutual trust -- and discover new methods to win. This is why the Rouge Forum was organized.

I do not believe anyone can predict how the vote will go. But the teachers of Detroit have already done their share to change their profession, by remembering whose side they are on.

Best,
Rich

Monday Update **Dear Friends,**

In these notes I have tried to balance between hurried journalism and thoughtful reflection. What follows was done quickly since many people are writing to know what happened today.

The vote is in and the Detroit educators' strike is done, for the time being. Between 7,000 and 8,000 DFT members voted overwhelmingly, probably seven to one, to return to work and to vote by DFT balloting in the schools on the new tentative agreement. Voting will conclude near September 22.

I have asked a friend, a professional negotiator for the National Education Association, to review the proposed contract and will have a detailed posting as soon as possible. Most of the analysis in yesterday's update appears to be accurate. If there are items that need to be reviewed, it appears to be because the agreement is even worse. To be brief, there is nothing in the contract that offers protection to students or teachers against class size abuse. Nothing promises libraries, books or supplies, in any enforceable way. The contract expressly allows the CEO to "reconstitute" schools which perform poorly on standardized tests, and nothing protects the teachers who are bounced from those schools. Importantly, built into the contract are factors which will fragment the union, pit members against one another, and make it more difficult to make gains in the years ahead. Many teachers I interviewed are aware of these weaknesses.

The agreement was distributed to less than 5,000 of the educators this morning. DFT President John Elliot said no more copies were available. However, teachers who arrived in timely fashion had the opportunity to read it. The meeting, set to start at 9:00 a.m., started nearly two hours late as thousands of teachers had to filter through the narrow doorways of Cobo Hall. Teachers cued in a line one-half mile long, doubling back on itself, for the chance to vote inside.

The teachers also had the chance to see opposing views. Members of both key caucuses urging a continuation of the strike distributed reams of material to teachers standing in line. They did not have much of a chance to hear those views in the meeting hall.

The DFT leadership, having learned something from the last meeting when everything went awry, held a fairly firm grip this time around. Elliot did not present the contract. After praising the teachers who picketed, he had four members of his executive board carry the news, while he repeated over and again, "We need to get through with this so we can get some lunch and get back to school." Each of the four presenters, in describing why one aspect or another of the contract could not be achieved, repeated, "Adamany was adamant."

Less than twelve people spoke in a brief question and answer period. The initial four questioners addressed trivial matters in the contract. This was puzzling until a leader of what most people see as the more moderate of the dissident caucuses came to the microphone and complained that members of Elliot's caucus had been allowed into the building early and had taken up positions to speak -- first in line. Steve Conn, leader of the what most teachers view as the more radical of the caucuses opposing Elliot, the caucus which gave impetus to the initiation of the strike in the last meeting, was so roundly booed by the audience that it was impossible for three of my colleagues located in different sections of the huge arena to hear him. Elliot cut Conn off well before his allotted time, which Conn noted, apparently for the record. There was no question where the vote was headed at that point. When the question was called, hundreds of teachers hurried out of the hall before the vote.

So what does this mean? Elliot portrayed the contract as the best that could be won, though he said publicly yesterday that there was nothing in the new contract that could not have been gained without the strike, repeating what Detroit Public Schools CEO David Adamany had said earlier in the day. In fact, the new contract has *less* in it than the previous TA, as the forthcoming analysis will demonstrate. Adamany, unable to contain himself, continues to threaten teachers with fines for the strike that is now over. Adamany practically crowed, following the vote, suggesting the vote restores Elliot's leadership and puts his vision of school reform back on track. Detroit Mayor, Dennis Archer, whose order to "appear at my office with your toothbrushes for marathon talks," was rejected by the union, also claimed that the opening of the schools represents a "new day for school

reform in Detroit." Elliot said he could now return to the era of labor-management cooperation.

Things are complex. Most of the teachers I interviewed felt the strike was successful in making wage gains that were not on the table before, and that the strike caused crisis-level problems like supplies and class size to be addressed, if not satisfactorily. They believe their time on the picket line was well worth it. Few teachers had illusions about many sections of the contract, which dozens of teachers called "lousy." While the vote today would indicate that an overwhelming ratification is set, it is possible that thoughtful educators, after careful study and review, will decide this contract will not deal with the day-to-day problems that make teaching in Detroit a very tough job. One speaker at the meeting said, "I have been in the district for 29 years and this is the worst contract I have seen yet. I want you to be sure there is an accurate vote count on it."

The great strength of many, if not most, teachers is their close ties to their kids. This is a strength that cynical people can exploit. Both the DFT and management worked hard on teachers desire to get back into school with their kids. This was a key factor in the vote.

Most working people are not going take on dominance without knowing that there is some reasonable plan of battle and some hope of winning. The Detroit teachers had to be aware that a longer job action would draw a severe response from all the forces lined up on the other side: wealth and their representatives, the school board, the Governor, the legislature, local managers, the press, the courts, the law, and finally the police. They had to know that their first line of defense, the DFT, with a budget of nearly \$5 million from dues, would be an unreliable ally in the struggle which would come. The distrust of the DFT leadership is profound, and underscores a trend throughout teacher unions. The educators knew no planning and no preparation had been put in place for a long job action. One teacher told me, "Right now, there is no way out. We have been through this before, we have lost some and won some. There will be another day."

Detroit teachers defied the law, made gains, and so far have gone unpunished. They had tremendous community support -- in a city where the media has fed the people a steady drumbeat of school reform for six months. The educators exploded the myth of labor-management cooperation, the partnership that masks one partner living off the other, and they blew aside their union leadership, making them extraneous as picket lines shut down the Detroit schools. While there is much room for criticism of the strike, Detroit teachers -- by taking direct action on their jobs and extending their struggle to the community -- changed the way school will be discussed for some time to come. They swept aside the appearances so carefully cultivated by the media: School reform is better buildings and kids in uniforms and parents under threat of arrest delivering kids to school. They showed that equality and democracy are good answers to those who want to use authoritarianism to buttress inequality. The educators demonstrated

that hope lies in the conscious action of human beings, which is why school is there to begin with. More later. I too have to go back to school, though my union may go on strike next week.

All the best,
Rich

An Analysis of the 1999 DFT Tentative Agreement

The DFT contract, negotiated by the slate controlled by AFT Vice-President, DFT President John Elliot and his caucus, is not merely a bad deal, it is a step backward from the TA Elliot negotiated prior to the strike. More significantly, the contract creates conditions which will quickly pit educators against one another, the Detroit community, and the union itself. A vote for this contract is to applaud the construction of the scaffold for one's own hanging.

The DFT agreement takes place in a city whose elite is deeply concerned about social control, especially with the introduction of casinos in the downtown area, where extreme poverty is just blocks away. Social control can be achieved in several ways: by rewarding and punishing, dividing and conquering, or by convincing people that inequality and injustice are the natural state of things, either invisible or unconquerable. The U.S., the richest and most apparently powerful country in the history of the world, is also the centerpiece of inequity and extreme privation, most of it located in cities of color, like Detroit, the most segregated city in the U.S., where more than 90% of the students are black.

In this context, in a society where de-industrialization coupled with significant rewards for those who remain employed in manufacturing makes for a passive industrial working class, teachers are centripetally positioned to struggle for social justice. They are the most unionized people in the U.S., and their workplaces are the last organizing points for the society.

At issue in education now is deepening stratification and authoritarianism, at nearly every level. Soon, a teaching force that is around 95% white and middle class will face students who are mostly children of color. In Detroit, the teaching force is far more integrated, but it is, of course, mostly middle class, and as colleges of education continue to graduate larger and larger classes of white graduates, and the suburbs recruit talented teachers of color, there is a growing caste shift in the educational work force.

For many years, the Detroit schools have suffered from physical neglect, a corrupt and inept bureaucracy, an exploitative and neglectful corporate community, and a union which has overseen and organized the decay of urban education all over the country. Now, the rich have taken back the city, seized the town and the schools. All but one of the present members of the school board, which was not elected but appointed by the

Detroit Mayor when the Governor dissolved the former board, are clearly representatives of wealth.

It is not true that the ruling classes in the U.S. are interested in producing a stupid populace, in order to mask their power. More to the point, elites seek to create a stratified populace with almost surgical precision; a populace that can perform often complex scientific and intellectual tasks, but which is held together by notions of the good of the nation, the good of the company, etc. So, in education, this means schools for scientists, doctors, lawyers, advertising reps, social workers, comedians, technologists -- and some schools that are pre-stripper, pre-inmate.

All of these schools need teachers. Over time, as the kids are more segregated, the educators will follow, as will their wages and benefits. Teachers who see wealthy kids in the morning will be paid like wealthy kids' teachers, and vice versa. The question is: how easily will U.S. educators be purchased? How much does it take to buy off the class size issue for example? And, how long will it be before an injury to one really does become an injury to all? Another question is key: who will fight back, and how?

The struggle in schools is not located solely in schools. The economic crisis which underpins the crisis in education goes far beyond the bounds of a schoolyard. Nor can this rise of inequality be met by a union. What is abundantly clear is that capital has nothing to offer to the overwhelming majority of people, and overcoming capital is not a union project. Resistance and change may initiate and radiate out from schools, but real change will have to be far deeper than the call for justice-based education -- a bogus cry which contributes to the false promises of education in a fundamentally undemocratic society. Every union in the U.S. has proved unfit to meet this deeper challenge, too undemocratic, too corrupt, too inept -- but also fundamentally the wrong tool for the job. Unions have not united people. They divide them.

There has never been one public education system in the U.S. There have been four or five or maybe more, each producing and reproducing different kinds of kids, mostly based on their parents' jobs, income, and race or caste. Now, however, elites need to deepen that stratification, to raise the quality of inner city schools to the point where the false hope of the past becomes real hope, for a few, in the future. In a wealthy society, the carrot can override, but not replace, the stick. Otherwise, the gentry risks social peace, and the casinos whose suburban gamblers are not going to take serious chances in order to have the opportunity to lose their rent.

This process is going forward full tilt. In Detroit, which never enjoyed the recovery that revived other rust-belt cities, the process is especially bitter. The CEO of the new school board is a notorious immature meglo-maniac who makes no pretense about school reform as a cooperative venture. In Detroit, it is an order. Part of that order is the DFT's tentative agreement described below.

Contracts are both relative and absolute: relative in that they can be reasonably compared to other similar contracts; absolute in that they are fitted to a specific

circumstance for particular people. We have learned that contracts are living documents, constantly sites of struggle between the contending sides that bargained them. GM and many other Detroit companies have simply abrogated signed contracts, demanded that the entire document be renegotiated in mid-term. It follows that contracts are the rules of a truce, that both sides tear at during their term. I am going to compare the Detroit contract to an educator contract of a nearby suburb, an NEA district, as are almost all of the suburban districts. The suburb is a blue-collar district, with a per capita student rate almost exactly the same as Detroit's.

Part of negotiations is also the milieu, the economic and political climate. This is from the *Washington Post*, September 11, 1999, regarding the auto contract which will probably be settled this week:

If there is a consensus on the outcome of the negotiations, (it will be) a 4 percent a year wage base increase for at least the first three years, a large increase in pension benefits, and a \$3,000 signing bonus.

Auto, of course, is a top employer even today in the Motor City. The auto contract keeps UAW members a little ahead of current inflation: 3.5%. This is the broad context of the negotiations.

The DFT never did a pre-bargaining survey of its members before it entered negotiations. The DFT supported every aspect of the takeover of the Detroit Public Schools (DPS). The union's bargainers were, according to usually sympathetic insiders, unprepared to bargain and inept in the process. The initial contract that the DFT leadership brought to the members was rejected. A nine-day strike ensued. A membership meeting of about 8,000 teachers voted to return to work, and to vote on the contract in the coming days. This is the broad context of the negotiations and the deal that resulted.

It is reasonably clear that the contract now up for a vote is worse than the contract that was initially presented. The first contract was for one year. Elliot will probably be voted out of office within two years. The current contract is for three years, and concessions were made which will be noted below. I shall save the worst for last.

The contract can be most easily approached in the ways that most teachers would look at it, straight to the money package and the rest for later, or the way most negotiators would look at it, wages, hours, and working conditions as an interrelated package. I take the later path, but turn right to the money.

Wages

The DFT package is based on the current 10-step salary schedule, with BA and MA divisions, that is typical of teacher contracts. In fact, most contracts have more steps. The multi-tiered pay plan, with rewards for degree attainment, is a leftover from the days that administrators controlled the unions. It is probably supported by most teachers, who believe they should see incremental advances for each year's work. However, the multi-

step plan really only delays income that could be achieved, and the frequently labyrinthian charts of who is where on the schedule make it fairly simple for managers and union leaders to locate a voting majority on the chart, and allow the remainder to do without. In brief, the steps divide people, in the interest of management.

The DFT TA is a good example of this process. The DFT offers rewards, a 10.5% increase over three years, the term of the deal, to the largest number of people (72%) in the unit, the top of the scale teachers. These people will stay about even with projected inflation rates. But entry-level teachers, who receive a mere 6.1%, will lose about 4% of their income. Most importantly, the salary cut offered to new teachers deepens the differences in teacher ranks, and will last for decades, while many of the educators at the top of the scale will retire, or be driven out of the system. Over the long haul, DFT has created a two-tier wage scale for young and old teachers, which will permanently divide the union -- and which buries young teachers at the bottom of a well where it will be hard to work out. This wage package, then, reflects the two-tier benefit package that Elliot negotiated in previous contracts, and which set a low standard for educators who will be in Detroit after 2003.

The BA minimum for DFT is almost equivalent to the suburban scale for 1999-2000, \$32,883 to 32786. However, at the top of the BA scale, ten years, the suburban unit is well ahead: \$56,329 to 52,931.

The MA minimum for DFT is \$36,348. The suburban MA minimum is \$35,094. The DFT MA maximum is 61,581. The suburban: \$66,272.

At issue in comparisons of this sort are matters like: how fast does a person move up? This would address the career salary. The steps are similar, until the last three years, when suburban teachers leap ahead. In 2001, Detroit teachers at the MA max, \$4,635, will still trail behind.

There is nothing in the contract that addresses the frequent promises of Detroit administrators: \$1,000 hiring bonuses to new hires. Nor are there the expected big wage hikes at the initial salary steps which would attract new teachers away from the suburbs.

However, the contract does add four new steps to the salary schedule, for both the BA and the MA. This addition is hidden, separated from the salary scale, in the back of the document, on page 9. The criteria for advancement are left completely in the hands of management. They are not automatic. Criteria include things like passing the many tests for certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Only a handful of black teachers, nationwide, have ever passed this test. Also considered is education "in the subject area they are teaching." This reflects the Detroit CEO's loathing for colleges of education and is designed to erode degrees like the Master's of Arts in Education. Those getting the step will also have to meet attendance requirements. The impact of the addition will be to stretch out the length of time in a career it takes to get to the top, and create further divisions between members. These additional steps are

disguised merit pay, and a shift in attendance policy, which the DFT claimed to have defeated.

Other DFT Misrepresentations

The DFT grossly falsified the contract to the members who voted to return to work. While they did say this is not the best of contracts, they also made claims about having made gains in terms of class size, supplies, and the hours of work.

DFT claimed gains in class size. There is NOTHING AT ALL to limit class size, in any way, in any school, in the contract. There is a promise to experiment, over three years, with 44 schools, and for the experiment to include 22 schools right away. There are 273 schools in DPS. The DFT, which agreed that space is a problem, has failed to note that there are many schools in Detroit designed for kids labeled with disabilities, and the inclusion of many of them would open up many buildings.

There is NOTHING AT ALL in the contract which requires administrators to be sure that there are libraries in each school, that children or teachers have access to books or computers or other resources.

The contract which members rejected included a daily prep time for elementary teachers. This was removed from the new contract, reverting to the old three preps a week. This section is to be "submitted to arbitration." The labor movement loses about 2/3 of the cases that go to arbitration, and the labor movement seeks to screen out bad cases before they get there. The question to the arbitrator is unclear, but it appears to be "Did DPS improperly withdraw a contract offer?" not, "Must the elementary teachers be given five preps?"

The new contract extends the hours of work, by failing to eliminate the oppressive duty period for high school teachers, and by eliminating 12 hours of professional development time, and twelve hours of planning sessions. In addition, 12 hours are added by eliminating two semester break days.

The DFT claimed to have made no significant retreats in the attendance policy, that "only those who abuse will be those who lose." This is not true. Any teacher who is absent for more than 8 days will not move up on the salary schedule, or receive a raise, and will never move up until they complete a 12-month period (not a school year but a calendar year) with less than 8 absences. Moreover, the new contract makes it impossible to grieve key disputes about the policy, referring disagreements to internal DPS departments.

The DFT did not mention that the new contract offers managers new ways to surveil and discipline teachers. While most teachers do not mind being observed and critiqued by people of good will, no one who has watched the behavior of the new school board and the CEO can believe this is the case. What will be at work is frightened principals enacting the rules of people who know nothing about a Detroit classroom. Adamany, the

CEO, questioned as to how he would discipline an unruly class, said. "I would quickly put down my chalk and tell them I would not teach until the class was prepared."

The contract offers teachers new ways to discipline children, and sets up teachers as enforcers for a new code of conduct. While some Detroit teachers are eager for new ways to discipline kids, it remains that the kids and their parents are the best ally, as the recent strike showed.

The worst part of the contract was not mentioned in the ratification meeting. This section addresses school RECONSTITUTION. Simply put, this means the CEO can close schools with low test scores. The teachers in those schools will have no rights, no rights to grieve, no rights of transfer, nothing. Since the contract clearly states that teachers have no seniority rights in transfers, teachers in reconstituted schools are designated as certified teacher at large, and left at large.

The impact of this will be that teachers who want to work, who deal with the poorest kids in the city, who score poorly on tests like the MEAP which measure parental income, will flee those kids, transfer early. What will be the impact on the kids?

* * *

Following the contract ratification vote, DPS CEO Adamany changed the agreed-upon contract, extending the work day in the second and third years of the agreement, and adding days to the school calendar. The DFT leadership did not respond. Immediately following the DPS strike, professors at Wayne State struck. Days later, the city bus drivers struck. The DPS strike clearly shifted the milieu for labor in the city, which had been mired in the memory of the devastated newspaper strike of 1997.

In November 1999, under pressure from citizen-activists with the Rouge Forum, the local press exposed the fact that there was no contractor bidding on the massive summer construction project, and that the key factor in assigning the contracts was political contributions. Much of the touted work was never done, much was slipshod. Adamany halted the project.

In mid-November, the Free Press revealed that Adamany had never signed the teacher contract. The rank and file was never advised. None of the DPS teachers had been paid the raise that was won in the promised tentative agreement. More than 1,000 teachers, most of them new hires, had not been paid at all. In the same month, there were 23 attempted rapes in or near city schools. On November 18, an estimated 5,000 students marched on the school center building, demanding not merely protection, but "books, supplies, lower class size." On December 2, about 75 teachers and students marched together at the school center building, echoing the same chant, and demanding to be informed of the contents of the teacher contract.



"The Spirit of Detroit"

Photo by John Smolinsky

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