

Hundreds of educators protest pay and job cuts at Ann Arbor, Michigan school board meeting

Our reporters
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Hundreds of teachers, paraprofessionals, parents and students packed a school board meeting in Ann Arbor, Michigan Wednesday night to oppose planned job and pay cuts for public school employees. The Democratic Party-controlled school board plans to cut \$25 million from next year's budget through an undisclosed number of layoffs, cutting transportation, janitorial and other services, and pay cuts of up to \$3 an hour for poorly paid teaching assistants.

Like other school districts around the state and across the country, the budget crisis is primarily caused by the Biden administration's decision to let the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) expire this September. The ending of the federal COVID school funding program threatens the jobs of at least 5,100 Michigan teachers over the next two years, according to the Citizens Research Council of Michigan. More than 140 job cuts are projected for Ann Arbor Public Schools (AAPS) alone.

AAPS officials claim the crisis has been compounded by falling enrollment and a supposed \$14 million "accounting error," which mistakenly counted a one-time state payment to the pension fund as regular revenue.

While rank-and-file educators want to fight, the Ann Arbor Education Association (AAEA) and its parent organization, the Michigan Education Association (MEA), have not proposed any strike action. On the contrary, AAEA President Fred Klein told educators before Wednesday's meeting that the district should "use attrition and retirements to continue to reduce staff

and right-size the district."

Fearing that rank-and-file workers could begin to take matters into their own hands, Klein warned against "frustration and anger" leading teachers and paraprofessionals to "turn against ourselves," by which he meant the MEA bureaucracy. He appealed for "unity" before he appealed to the district to stretch out the cuts over more than one school year to prevent an explosion.

The attitude of the school authorities was summed up in an op-ed piece in the *Detroit Free Press* written by school board president Torchio Feaster who said the board would consider public "input" in formulating their budget-cutting plan, but it would "undoubtedly require staff reductions."

Educators were in a militant mood when they entered the meeting. They responded with anger to the efforts of board members to keep any discussion of the budget off the agenda, and then to limit public comments to 30 seconds. To maintain some semblance of credibility, several board members voted to put the budget on the agenda and limit remarks to one minute.

More than 110 educators and supporters spoke or submitted comments. Many pointed to the devastating impact layoffs and budget cuts would have on students, and expressed their solidarity with teaching assistants, also known as paraprofessionals, for their indispensable work in the education process. "Pay the parapros!" one teacher said to widespread applause.

One high school student said, "The adults that are in charge of the district have excluded everyone when it comes to making important decisions, which has led us into this pitfall. All the teachers that I've had the privilege to work with have not only guided me but

supported me through my high school years. They are not the problem.

“My mom is an AAPS teacher and has to have a second job just to help with everyday expenses. She is not the problem. The TAs that were already underpaid and now below the poverty line because of your pay cuts are not the problem.”

She concluded: “Seeing and hearing how this district treats our teachers and staff has taught me to never go into education because of the mistreatment. You are looking at a kid who had a mission, but you single-handedly ruined that.”

Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for US vice president, addressed himself directly to the educators in the audience. He said he had spoken at similar meetings in Flint and Wayne-Westland and pointed to the fact that more than 5,000 Michigan teachers faced the loss of their jobs because Biden had allowed COVID relief school funding to expire.

“I’ve urged rank-and-file teachers to prepare for strike action to defend public education for your students. Politicians from both political parties claim there is no money for public education. But when it comes to bailing out Wall Street, when it comes to corporate tax cuts, when it comes to funding their endless wars, there is no lack of money. That is the future they are offering the children that you nurture—a future of war and arrests for opposing it.”

As school board officials tried to stop White and cut off his microphone, the SEP candidate concluded, “Stopping these budget cuts will not be done through backroom deals by the Michigan Education Association to ‘right-size’ the district. You, the rank-and-file teachers, must take the initiative yourselves, and prepare a strike to defend public education,” White declared to applause from educators.

While the MEA officials did everything to prevent educators from seeing their struggle in these broader terms, several comments during and after the meeting connected the teachers’ fight with the fight against war, including the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. Several speakers denounced the school board for doing business with the Sam Bernstein Law Firm because Mark Bernstein is a member of the University of Michigan Board of Regents, which has ordered the police state crackdown on anti-genocide protesters on the campus.

Educators who spoke to the WSWS before the meeting also connected the fight against austerity and war. “I’ve taught my whole life, at a great cost not just financial but personal, because to be an educator and to do it well is to ask a lot of sacrifice from your family. ... Not supporting teachers hurts everybody, especially the kids. It is really messed up that we are spending money to go and kill people ... instead of helping the living.”

Asked what he thought about the arrests of more than 2,500 students for protesting the slaughter of the Palestinians, he said, “What they’re quietly doing, or maybe not so quietly, is suppressing the most progressive spirit the most progressive spirit in our country. You saw it in Vietnam. You saw it during the so-called Persian Gulf War, I was part of those protests, and you don’t silence those voices. I would love to see workers stand in solidarity with the students.”

“As a single parent of three kids, taking a \$3 [pay] cut is stressful. It’s making things a lot harder. I’m barely getting by right now. This is not just affecting teachers but literally our whole community. Our students are going to suffer.” When asked about the nearly trillion-dollar military budget and the recent \$95 billion bipartisan military funding package, she responded, “Why do we even have to hear that? We have money available for war but we don’t have money to put into our schools to help pay for classroom materials, to give our teachers the salaries they deserve.” She concluded by defending the protesting students, saying, “They should not be persecuted. ... Everyone should be able to speak their mind freely.”

A vote on the austerity measures could come as soon as the board’s next meeting on May 15. In a statement issued on April 17, the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee urged Ann Arbor teachers and support staff to join and build the committee to unify educators across the state, nationally and internationally to defend public education.

For more information about joining the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee, fill out the form below.



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