



Reporter

June, 2010

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PRIVATIZATION IN ROYAL OAK

By Sid Kardon

In a repudiation of the needs of students for quality services and the desires of community members to maintain our educational support staff, the Royal Oak School Board voted 6 to 1 on May 13th to terminate our custodians, maintenance workers, and bus drivers and outsource their jobs to a private company.

Most community members understand that private sector services, motivated by profit and not student or school need, are vastly inferior to those provided by public education employees. On the face of things, that understanding would seem to reduce the issue to a straightforward financial one. However, that is not the case as evidenced by the Board's vote to privatize in light of the Royal Oak Educational Support Personnel Association's financially competitive bid in which they offered drastic reductions in their wages and benefits. As a result, the vote was not a financial one; it was a philosophical one pitting a corporate agenda against a community based public school district. Only Board member Jeff Brinker voted to support Royal Oak students and community members. All other Board members, encouraged by Superintendent Thomas Moline's offensive comments about ROESPA and Business Manager John Schwartz's misleading financial analysis, voted to degrade student services even knowing that the financial difference between the private bid and ROESPA's offer was insignificant.

The implication for us as we attempt to bargain is to understand that the Board's attack on teachers is not a financially based one. It is a political and economic attack that makes me more determined than ever to fight cuts in wages and benefits. The administration has never suggested that a cut in our wages would lead to the betterment of the school district in any specific way. How many teachers might be saved? Where exactly would the money saved be spent were we to take a pay cut? No response. All money, unadvisedly given back by us would do nothing more than enhance the 6.2 million dollars currently in the equity fund - a fund that deprives public school students and teachers alike. I have no interest in enhancing the equity fund by taking a cut in pay.

The winners in the Teacher Pay Reduction Sweepstakes on a statewide level would be right wing politicians such as Senator Michael Bishop and John Pappageorge and radical anti-public education groups such as the Mackinaw Center for Public Policy, politicians and groups who are dedicated to the dismantling of public schools and the financial and professional degradation of teachers. On a local level, winners would be Thomas Moline whose anti-union animus is increasingly evident and Board member Gary Briggs who consistently votes against contract extensions because of politics, not finances.

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I am unwilling to take a wage cut because those individuals and organizations say I must. I am unwilling to sacrifice the future of public educators and their professional and financial lives to the corporate takeover of our schools. And, I'm unwilling to sacrifice our benefits simply because some members of the public do not have an insurance plan as good as ours. Giving up our benefits does not help others get better benefits. Just the opposite is true. We should be a standard bearer for excellent benefits - unapologetically deserved by us - for others. One of the goals of our parent organization, the National Education Association, is to secure better health insurance for all Americans.

Unions created a middle class life style for millions of American families through over a century of struggle with corporate America and its political allies, a struggle in which thousands gave their lives. A life style that enabled us to buy a house, a car, send our kids to college, and take care of our elderly was then codified into law during the Roosevelt Administration's New Deal. Social security, Medicare, unemployment compensation and other financial underpinnings of work life along with civic works programs constituted a shift in taxation policies from ones that favored corporations to ones that favored working families.

Not everyone, however, believed in the tenets of President Roosevelt's New Deal and President Lyndon Baines Johnson's successor Great Society. On a national level, the attack on the middle class began when President Ronald Reagan claimed that public services were a failure and that unions interfered with a productive economy. After firing members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization and decertifying the union, it became open season on public services and unions. Reagan's modern day avatars in Michigan, Senators Bishop and Pappageorge, are delivering the same message - fire union members such as our custodians and bus drivers regardless of the quality of their work and question how well public education works, creating a media driven public comfort level with cutting the pay and benefits of teachers. That same philosophy is being

aggressively implemented in Royal Oak by Moline, Briggs, and Schwartz.

I'll say it one more time - any cuts that we offer in the misplaced spirit of sacrifice will permanently damage our profession, our personal and family welfare, and our public schools. It will not be converted "to the classroom," as the popular refrain tells us. Locally, it will lead to an increase in the equity fund. There will be absolutely no abatement of privatization. Building secretaries will be privatized next, followed by ancillary services such as social work, speech, and media specialists. This will lead to a weakening of the union resulting in salary loss and the eventual loss of teachers' rights such as seniority and tenure.

It's easy to capitulate by allowing the media and ultra right wing politicians and groups to aggressively attempt to convince us to "sacrifice." It's much harder to stand and fight, especially when all we want to do is focus on our students and teach. But in the long run, fighting achieves just that. It allows us to focus on our students with our rights and salaries secured by our determination to never give up. Whether it's our ability to have the reasonable and comfortable life style that we studied and now work for, or the ability of our students to have a quality public education rather than a corporate one, it is critical that we stand up to the administration and school board.

POSTSCRIPT— Since writing this article, it was announced on May 22nd, that there was actually much more money in the school aid fund than anticipated. This led Senator Bishop to quickly say that we shouldn't spend the money for schools; instead the money should be shifted to the state general fund. This is further evidence that school finances are aggressively manipulated to continually show a financial problem that doesn't need to exist in order to weaken public schools and erode our pay and benefits. Our problem is a political one, not a financial one.

Marshall McLuhan said, "There are no passengers on Spaceship Earth. We are all crew." Well, there are no passengers on the Good Ship MEA either. We are all crew and need to be in Lansing on June 24th, steering public education together.

STOP the attacks— INVEST in public schools!

**Enough
is
Enough!**



Attend the Capitol rally in Lansing on June 24

Make your voice heard – Enough is Enough!

- Who:** You (and more than 10,000 other MEA members and public education supporters)
- What:** Public Education Rally at the State Capitol
- When:** Official rally start time—11 a.m. (Rally attendees can begin arriving at 9 a.m. Expected end time approximately 12:30 p.m.)
- Where:** East Capitol steps and lawn (between Allegan Street, Capitol Avenue and Ottawa Street in downtown Lansing)
- Why:** To stop the attacks on public school employees by securing adequate, equitable, stable funding for public education.

- ▶ Transportation and parking—Check with your local UniServ office about any group transportation options that may be available for your area. Designated parking areas, shuttle schedules, and maps will be available online at www.mea.org/enough.
- ▶ Wear RED or MEA Proud Union Member merchandise.
- ▶ Bring homemade signs (no sticks, please) or signs from local May 24 rallies.
- ▶ Water will be available—downtown Lansing restaurants and stores will know to expect large crowds throughout the morning and lunchtime for other drinks, snacks and meals.



For more information, go to www.mea.org/enough.

MAY 24th RALLY

