

STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS TO THE DETROIT FEDERATION OF TEACHERS  
January 25, 2015

*Fellow educators,*

I have called us together for this meeting to address what I believe is the most urgent crisis in the history of our union and our public school system. Today, I hope to initiate a plan of action to confront that crisis, and I ask for your support in facing the monumental challenges in front of us. While our politicians are delivering speeches on the state of our nation, I wish to deliver an address on the state of our own union, and to tell the truth that our politicians will not admit.

Our lives as teachers are built upon our commitment to the young people of Detroit. We all embarked upon that commitment knowing that we would face great difficulties, but also believing in the possibility that our hard work could make a difference. Some of us are old survivors who chose to endure the many years of hardships. Others are new to the district, and have been tested from the very beginning by what are now some of the most degraded school conditions in the nation. All of us, young and old, live under the constant threat that our jobs could be the next to disappear and that our students could be further deprived of the few resources they have left. Many are here today seeking answers to what can be done.

My pledge to you today is not that we will find every answer or sweep aside all obstacles at once, but that we will begin a collective fight for our students and our schools—a fight to save public education, to save our union, and to realize the promise of hope and progress that our city truly deserves. I believe that our strength and our potential extend far beyond our own numbers, because the struggle for our union is united with the needs of our students and community. As I have said before, I will say again: the struggle for our union is, and must be, a civil rights struggle for the people of Detroit. We will not march alone.

In the week since my election as DFT president, I have made regular visits to schools and talked with many teachers about where we go from here. It was a pleasure to be greeted by the enthusiasm and smiles of old friends and new, and all of the teachers I met raised their own concerns and demands. Class size, job security, frozen pay, principal harassment, special education resources and ancillary services were regular topics. And although the challenges required to confront these issues are immense, there is clearly an awakening sentiment that something can be done. With your active leadership and support, yes, something *will* be done.

We find ourselves in the vortex of a national attack on public education. From Lansing to the White House, all of the nation's leading policy makers advocate cutting resources from the public schools and diverting the funds towards charter school experiments. But the charter mania among the elite has not been shared by the rest of the popula-

tion—out of the 49 million students attending schools that receive public funds, 96% of the students continue to attend traditional public schools; only 4% attend charters. In fact, in the few places where charter schools have become widespread, their introduction was foisted against the will of the local population. In places like Detroit and Oakland, the outright state takeover of the district was necessary in order to impose the new system.

The results have been catastrophic: in every charter-imposed district, the resource deficits have decimated the public schools, while the charters have underperformed their public counterparts in spite of every rigged financial advantage. Instead of benefitting from the supposed “market competition” between public and charter, the real outcome has been to lower the quality of education across the board. Teachers’ unions—which had been the traditional line of defense for public education—largely capitulated in the face of the attacks, causing membership numbers and morale to plummet. The advocates for greater resources for our most impoverished public schools are now mocked as “waiting for Superman”—we are told to accept the corporate schemes of Lex Luthor, instead.

This social experiment has long since failed in Detroit and in numerous other highly segregated, majority-black and Latino districts, and is now perpetuated only on the basis of completely circular arguments. They say that the takeover is needed to balance the budget, but when the takeover only makes financial matters worse, they say that this makes it necessary to continue the takeover. They say that the takeover is needed to improve academic performance, but when the takeover diminishes academic performance, they insist on applying the same bad remedy: more takeover. They say that charters are needed to innovate education, but when the charters only exacerbate the crisis of education, they say that this crisis necessitates the creation of more charters. They say that school closings and layoffs are necessary to eliminate the deficit, but when these policies force thousands of students to leave the district along with their per-pupil funding, we are then told that this requires even more school closings and more layoffs. For over fifteen years, we have weathered this continuous cycle of destruction. There is a common saying that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results—we are living in a cyclone of insanity.

Our union can and must stand against this destructive cycle; the human cost is too high a price for our society to afford. In every segregated school district where educational opportunities have crumbled, the claimed reduction in government spending has in fact been completely offset by the collateral expenses of social decay. In place of the obligation to invest in the futures of our young people, we have witnessed instead the counterposed investment in an increasingly militarized police force and a titanic prison industry. We have witnessed the

proliferation of urban blight and unemployment. In places like Ferguson, Missouri, we have witnessed new urban uprisings, echoing the same social discontent that led to the Detroit upheaval in 1967 and many disturbances across the nation. Authorities tell us that we are too poor to invest in quality educational conditions; the reality is that we can't afford *not* to invest in the futures of our young people. Never again can we afford to accept the argument that there is not enough money. Either the nation will invest in teachers and text books, or it will pay a terrible price for urban warfare and destruction. Let us be a united voice for hope and progress.

Because we are educators, we also care deeply about the philosophy of the education system in which we work. We are practitioners of pedagogical theory, and earned our positions through careful study of the accumulated methods for facilitating learning. We cannot ignore the fact that the governing philosophy being imposed on our district is not based in any tested educational method, but instead derives from crude economics. The current regime is almost entirely based on the privatized, cheap and narrow schemes of the conservative economist Milton Friedman, rather than the proven science of traditional pedagogy. The cheap and narrow focus is not only a theory for reducing government spending, but it is also a theory about the position in society for which our students are being trained.

The current regime in Detroit has stripped from the schools nearly all humanities, creative arts and music programs—the hallmarks of a liberal arts education. In their place, technical and vocational training have taken priority. The theory of the regime has been to guide the hopes of students away from the attainment of a top university education, instead fixing their career paths towards lower-paying, less-educated sectors of the workforce. Even the prescribed teaching schemes cater to these backwards priorities, replacing creativity and critical thinking with rote memorization and scripted test preparation. In the EAA schools, many students barely receive any education at all—they spend all day in front of a computer screen, following mindless instructions like robots. Soaring class size also transforms schools into sweatshops, diverting attention away from learning and squandering time and energy on the taxing maintenance of discipline and order.

History teachers should recognize this regressive shift in priority as an extension of the philosophy of Booker T. Washington. Over one hundred years ago, Washington argued that the pursuit of full equality in black education had been an error. “It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top,” he said. His pragmatist theory governed the Tuskegee education machine in the South, training young black men to enter only those occupations which were acceptable to the old Jim Crow system. Many thousands of black Americans fled the South, migrating to Northern cities like Detroit in search of better jobs and education. This was the origin of the black community that still resides in

Detroit to this day. But now, in the face of a national wave of attacks on education, there is no North to which our community can escape. With our backs to the wall, our only choice today is to stand and fight.

If our community is to thrive, this will require restoring the promise of equal, quality education and Martin Luther King's dream of an integrated America. Education is the cornerstone of a democratic society. Education is the litmus test for the democratic principle of equal opportunity. Education ought to be a sacred obligation to the future of our young people, and not a tool for private profit for the benefit of today's robber barons. Our role is not simply to prepare our students for a career, but to enable our students to exercise their freedom and to pursue their happiness as equal, educated citizens. In order to fulfill that role, we must be better organized together to defend our students and ourselves.

I intend to rebuild our union from top to bottom. Among my first initiatives as your president, I will immediately begin the recruitment and training of building representatives at every school where there is a vacancy. I will work to ensure that teacher grievances receive effective responses, and I will commit the weight of union leadership to defend our representatives against all forms of principal harassment and subversion. Under my presidency, teacher grievances will no longer be swept under the rug; they will take priority and go to arbitration. Although our contract is weak, we can do much more to enforce its provisions that can offer some relief to our members. Building representatives will be trained to conduct grievance campaigns and rebuild teacher leadership in every building. Achieving smaller class size is absolutely critical—so many teachers labor under truly flagrant excesses, and this problem compromises teaching and learning throughout the district. The subjective and capricious evaluation system must also be challenged. Teachers must receive their evaluation results and fall teaching assignments before the end of the school year in June, with appeals to be heard immediately afterwards. I pledge to restore monthly meetings for our members, and to restore our union office as a professional and functioning resource. I further intend to build organizing campaigns to bring the EAA and charter school teachers into the DFT, rebuilding our numbers and repairing the fragmented state of education. I intend to rebuild our active capacity such that, in the event that our members wish to use our most powerful weapon—the strike—we will be in a strong enough position to win.

At all times, I will maintain an unwavering connection to our students and community members, as well as to fellow union activists across the nation. It is my hope that we can serve as a national model for the defense of public education, inspiring teachers everywhere of the possibility to stand up for our schools.

Today is a new beginning for the Detroit Federation of Teachers. At a time when the very existence of our union is at stake, today is also

the most important turning point in our union history. We face a difficult road ahead. I hope that today we can begin discussing and voting on a program of demands, and that our members can now thrive as active participants and leaders in a democratic decision-making process. I accept your mandate to lead this union to fight for the quality learning conditions that our students and teachers deserve. But I cannot succeed without your help. Join this fight, and together we can strive for the brightest future for the city we love.