

Detroit teachers' union OKs contract

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The Detroit Federation of Teachers approved a new 3-year contract early this morning that calls for salaried teachers to loan \$10,000 to the district over a period of 40 paychecks, no pay increases until 2011, and nearly \$28 million in savings on health care costs.

By a 3,578 to 2,031 vote, teachers ratified the new agreement which goes into effect immediately and contains new academic reforms such as a comprehensive teacher evaluation system and school-based performance bonuses and a system of priority schools. It affects 7,000 union members.

"This was a contract that had to be negotiated under the most difficult of circumstances so it's not happiness on my part but relief that the membership paid more attention to our truth than the lies and rhetoric of the dissidents," said Union President Keith Johnson.

Tensions were high surrounding the new contract. While talking to reporters after vote totals were released early Saturday morning, Johnson got into a verbal exchange as some teachers opposed to the agreement vocalized their dissatisfaction in the background of the interview. One teacher yelled out "You're a servant!" Another came to Johnson's defense. "They don't speak for us," she said of the dissenters.

Steve Conn, who teaches at Cass Tech High School and organized opposition to the new contract, vowed to oust Johnson and to continue to defeat the contract. He and other members who argued the voting process was tainted because of outdated voter rolls and ballot wording that favored ratification have issued a formal challenge to the contract vote with the union's leadership.

"This is a sad, pathetic agreement that provides nothing for the young people except more destruction of public education," he said. "...No one but (Detroit Public Schools Emergency Financial Manager) Rob Bobb and Keith Johnson are happy with this agreement."

With a formal challenge, Johnson said "there has to be a substantive basis for the challenge and there is none." He also denied the voting process was tainted, saying it's the same process the union has used for 40 years.

The new contract comes as Detroit Public Schools is facing a \$219 million shortfall. Bobb said the contract's approval signaled a new day for Detroit's schoolchildren and the district can now move forward implementing educational reforms.

"This contract recognizes the importance of teachers to improving performance in our schools," he said. "I applaud the teachers for taking the time to carefully review all of the details of the package, especially in an environment when so many parties sought to foster misinformation."

Mayor Dave Bing weighed in Saturday morning, approving of the contract vote.

"I applaud the DFT's recognition of the importance of truly putting our children first, and their willingness to compromise at a time when there is really little choice," he said in a written statement. "I hope the city's unions will also be so moved to follow suit and consider the future of our city in their willingness to compromise, or lack thereof, in negotiations."

The Detroit Federation of Teachers will hold a press conference today at the union's headquarters on West Grand Boulevard.

A Wayne County Circuit judge, meanwhile, refused Friday to toss out a lawsuit by the district's board of education against Bobb over control of the district's academic policy. Judge Wendy Baxter wants both sides back in court Jan. 8.

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