



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Detroit teachers win better working conditions and wages, 1999

31 August

1999

to: 8 September

1999

**Country:** United States

**Location City/State/Province:** *Detroit, Michigan*

### Goals:

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
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.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 104. Professional strike
- 121. Refusal of public support

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 104. Professional strike
- 121. Refusal of public support

### Methods in 3rd segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 104. Professional strike
- 121. Refusal of public support

### Methods in 4th segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 104. Professional strike
- 121. Refusal of public support

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 104. Professional strike

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 104. Professional strike

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Economic Justice

**Group characterization:**

- Unionized public school teachers

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Rank-and-file members of the Detroit Federation of Teachers

**Partners:**

AFL-CIO, American Federation of Teachers

**External allies:**

Not known

**Involvement of social elites:**

Vice President Al Gore gave a speech in Detroit supporting the strike

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

### Groups in 1st Segment:

- Detroit public school teachers

### Groups in 2nd Segment:

### Groups in 3rd Segment:

### Groups in 4th Segment:

### Groups in 5th Segment:

### Groups in 6th Segment:

**Segment Length:** *Approximately 1.5 days*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

### Opponents:

Detroit Public School system, Detroit Federation of Teachers

### Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

### Campaigner violence:

Not known

### Repressive Violence:

Not known

## Success Outcome

### Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

### Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

### Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

### Notes on outcomes:

Sources remain unclear as to how much direct effect the strike had on the language of the contract agreement, though it is clear that teachers received a 2% yearly raise, and did implement a seniority clause; both were in the teachers' demands. The demand for smaller class sizes, though, remained largely unmet. However, the union did vote to accept the contract, indicating that it was at least somewhat in line with their original set of demands.

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The Detroit, Michigan public school system (DPS) was tasked with serving 180,000 students in one of the state's poorest districts. The 11,500 teachers in the city's 271 public schools represented by the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), a member of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL), taught classes with as many 40 students, and were faced with the prospect of a new "merit pay" system, which would make individual teachers' pay increases dependent on their students' performance on state-wide standardized tests. School districts in urban Detroit received around half the funding of those in more affluent suburbs, a divide which extended to teachers' salaries.

Ahead of the July 1999 contract negotiations, the State legislature abolished the elected school board, replacing it with a "reform

board” appointed by Republican governor John Engler. None of the members had classroom experience, and most lived outside of the city and worked for industry, banks, or casinos. The DFT endorsed both the takeover and the new school board. A number of rank and file DFT members felt the new board could not adequately address the district’s concerns. In August, DFT leadership also circulated a document outlining the results of the last two months of bargaining. The union had not negotiated for smaller class sizes, and had agreed to a merit pay, as well as to take away pay increases for teachers who had used more than 8 of their 15 sick days.

Sensing the desire for a strike, DFT president John Elliot began the August 30th citywide meeting with a talk from a lawyer working for the union, who outlined the possible legal and financial repercussions of striking. The crowd chided the lawyer, who in turn chided the crowd. One high school teacher took a microphone, interrupted the lawyer and asked everyone in favor of striking to move to one side of the hall, and everyone against to the other. The teachers voted overwhelmingly to strike, with roughly 2000 of the 3000 members in attendance affirming the call. The strike vote went against DFT leadership, which sought to extend contract negotiations with the district for another 10 days.

At a press conference the day after, both Elliot and reform board and Wayne State University president David Adamany came out against the strike, with Elliot blaming the vote on a “militant minority” of teachers that had agitated for strikes in the past. Both urged teachers to cross the picket lines and return to work. Shortly thereafter, strikers circulated a petition of support for their actions. On Tuesday August 31, just 150 teachers across Detroit returned to work. Classes were cancelled and the first strike in seven years was underway.

In an open meeting on September 1, striking teachers along with supportive students, parents, unionists and other allies ratified a list of 15 demands, including such things as an institutionalized seniority system and adequate electrical outlets for all classrooms.

The next day, a small rally of less than one hundred strike supporters was held at the iconic Spirit of Detroit statue. The AFL-CIO, of which the DFT was a part, had a small presence there to show its support. The DFT, essentially forced to support the strike despite more conservative leadership, held another rally, though its demands of the district remained distanced from the strikers’. It was also at this time that a number of suburban teachers began to show support.

Friday morning, an estimated 6,000 strikers and their allies marched, demanding “Lower class size, books and supplies!” Nearly 10,000 teachers and allies surrounded the school board building where negotiations were being held. As more people took to the streets, the media began to pressure the mayor and the governor to put an end to negotiations and reach an agreement with the DFT, though overall media coverage remained mixed in terms of support for the strike.

That weekend, union bargainers began negotiations with the school district, lasting until 9:45 PM. Despite still-mixed support for the job action within its leadership, the DFT aired a radio ad, outlining reasons for the strike. On Sunday, supportive students, parents and workers held another supporting rally outside of the building where DPS negotiations were being held, emphasizing that previous Board improvements to school facilities were not adequate steps to dealing with teachers’ demands. Addressing strikers, AFL-CIO president John Sweeney and touring Vice President Al Gore lent their verbal support to the teachers.

On Monday, DFT strikers led Detroit’s 20,000-person Labor Fest march, the city’s commemorative Labor Day event. Increased city and statewide support for the strike doubled the event’s size over the previous year. The union continued negotiations with the DPS shortly after the Labor Fest’s end. At 8:00, Elliot held a press conference, announcing that a “tentative agreement” with the DPS had been reached, and that the union would mail out ballots to DFT members shortly. The new contract included a 2% pay hike, but still left wages below teachers in the more affluent Detroit suburbs. In the same conference, Board president Adamany again condemned the strike, threatening to leverage \$500 in fines to individual teachers for each day they struck.

On Tuesday, the strike continued as teachers mulled over the details of the announced contract. At a meeting on Wednesday night, strikers voted overwhelmingly to accept the negotiated contract and end the weeklong strike the following day. On September 25, the union ratified the contract, with a vote of 6,328 to 2,058. The contract allowed for a 2% yearly raise, as well

as higher pay for senior teachers. Still, Detroit teachers' wages remained below their suburban counterparts, and other calls, such as those for smaller class sizes, remained unanswered. Despite mixed feelings around the final contract, union members were satisfied enough to vote on provisions which would not have been included without their strike action.

## Research Notes

### Sources:

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### Additional Notes:

The opponent/partner relationship between strikers and the DFT was complicated throughout, with many rank and file activists heavily criticizing president John Elliot and the rest of the DFT leadership. Often, the union would come out publicly in support of the strike while top officials remained skeptical and even hostile to the job action.

### Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Kate Aronoff, 13/11/2011

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