

High schools or holding pens?—The attack on education and the threat to democratic rights

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Over the past two decades the political establishment in the United States has followed a two-pronged approach towards public education. First, it has starved the public schools of funding. As a result many schools are virtually collapsing from old age, disrepair and a chronic shortage of teachers, text books and supplies. Second, the authorities have increasingly used police repression to create an atmosphere of intimidation and fear in the schools.

Recent events in Detroit exemplify the convergence of these two trends. On March 2, shortly after morning classes started at Cooley High School, six police squad cars pulled up to the school. No sooner had the late bell rung than some 50 officers and security guards began seizing students in the hallways.

Ninety youth were lined up against the wall, searched and handcuffed. The auditorium was turned into a make-shift holding pen before the youth were driven to jail. As one 16-year-old said, “We were treated like dogs.”

The school’s principal said he had requested the police action to stop truancy and teach students to get to class on time. The police sweep was endorsed by the city’s political establishment, from the mayor’s office to the news media to the teachers’ union bureaucracy. Two weeks later the police carried out a second dragnet, arresting 17 more students. School authorities are threatening similar raids at other high schools, on the grounds that lateness is a crime subject to arrest and imprisonment.

Such methods are, of course, unheard of at schools attended by the sons and daughters of the rich and privileged. But they are becoming almost routine in working class areas across the country. In these neighborhoods, once a student walks through the school door he or she may have to pass through a metal detector, only to face a phalanx of police with drug-sniffing dogs. Undercover police agents are given free reign to spy.

Numerous cases of strip searches are being reported.

A new bill sponsored by Senate Republicans calls for the training of former military personnel as teachers, and proposes that all elementary and secondary schools be provided with metal detectors, fences, closed circuit cameras and police detachments, including canine patrols.

Such methods violate the rights of students and flout constitutional bans on illegal search and seizure. They set the stage for stepped-up attacks on the democratic rights not only of youth, but of working people in general and anyone who expresses opposition to the powers-that-be.

The public schools are a microcosm of American society. Many of their students come from working class neighborhoods plagued by unemployment, poverty-wage jobs, welfare cuts, drugs, child abuse and crime. Detroit’s schools—where two out of every three students come from families living below the poverty level—are typical of inner-city facilities. Under-funded and overcrowded, they offer no hope of escape from conditions of poverty and oppression. Is it any wonder that such places breed anger and frustration that sometimes find expression in violent outbursts?

Police sweeps, boot camp-style discipline, or, alternatively, pumping students full of behavior-controlling drugs like Ritalin, serve a common purpose: to intimidate working class youth and force them to accept the oppressive conditions they face. The authorities want docile and obedient students who accept orders without question, from policemen and school principals today, and military officers or bosses in low-paying jobs tomorrow.

The turn to repressive measures in response to social problems is not unique to the sphere of education. It is the typical reaction of the powers-that-be to all social questions in America. The billy club, the prison cell and the electric chair have become the major instruments of social policy.

The political spokesmen of both big business parties and

the corporate-controlled media reject the very notion that crime, teenage pregnancy or drug abuse are social problems, born of poverty and deprivation. Instead they criminalize the victims of the social system. With 1.5 million prisoners, the United States incarcerates a higher percentage of its people than any other nation in the world.

The assault on the public schools involves more than budget cuts. For the past two decades right-wing forces, backed by major sections of big business, have been waging an ideological and political attack on the very principle of public education. They denounce the school system as a creature of “big government” and bureaucracy, and suggest that it represents a form of creeping socialism. Private schools and schools-for-profit, on the other hand, are glorified as the embodiment of liberty and the high ideals of the “free market.”

To prove their case, they set out to wreck the public schools, championing budget cuts to bleed them dry, and then proclaim the public school system an irredeemable failure. Why this frenzied hostility to the principle of public education?

It is in large part because the establishment of public education was historically bound up with the struggles of the working class, and was championed by reformers who saw free public schools as essential to the creation of a more equal and democratic society. There is an egalitarian component to the conception of public education, in the principle that all children, regardless of the income or class status of their parents, should be guaranteed a quality education at the expense of the government.

In America, where the democratic and egalitarian aspirations of the working class have lacked an organized and independent expression, in terms of a mass political party, workers have looked all the more to the schools as a way of bettering their lives and those of their children.

Today, such traditions come into violent collision with a society whose ruling institutions are consumed by the single aim of building up the stock portfolios and financial assets of a very small but all-powerful economic elite. The resulting growth of social inequality, in which the chasm between the rich and the broad masses of working people continually widens, produces a state of affairs that is ultimately incompatible with the existence of democratic institutions.

Thus there is a deep social and ideological connection between the assault on public education and the growing attack on democratic rights.

Given the dimensions of this attack, one essential

question arises: Why has there been so little organized opposition? The police sweeps in Detroit, for example, provoked anger among many parents and students, but this quickly dissipated. Why?

In tackling this question, the first thing to point out is the absence of any officially recognized institutions through which workers can even articulate their opposition, let alone give it organized expression. Certainly not the corporate-controlled media. The Democratic Party is virtually indistinguishable from the Republicans. Official civil rights organizations like the NAACP either remain silent about “law and order” crackdowns in the schools, or openly support them. The teachers and school employee unions enthusiastically endorse such repressive measures.

This, however, only goes part way in answering the question. Even more fundamental is the lack of an alternative political perspective to the capitalist status quo among broad layers of workers. Insofar as workers do not understand the class issues that underlie the deepening social crisis, and do not see both the need and the possibility of putting an end to the system of class privilege, they are held back from effectively defending their interests.

The Socialist Equality Party in the US is being built to bring a socialist perspective to workers and young people, who will increasingly find themselves in struggle against the profit system, as the basis for the construction of a mass, independent political movement of the working class. Only through the building of this movement can democratic rights, including the right to quality education for all, be defended.



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