

The devastation of CUNY: a cynical attack on working class youth

Fred Mazelis
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I would like to add some comments to the important article of July 18 on the attack on the City University of New York. As a graduate of City College some 35 years ago, I can personally attest to some of the changes which have taken place in the intervening period, changes which have little to do with the simplistic and demagogic attack on the 'lower standards' of today's students.

While there has been some dispute over the move by the CUNY Board of Trustees to deny admission to students who fail to pass various proficiency exams, the remarkable thing is how muted the debate has been. The reason for this is alluded to later in the article: the Democrats, the union leaders, and the self-anointed and media-anointed spokesmen for the poor, the black and Hispanic populations whose children make up a large part of the student body all agree with Giuliani and Pataki on the fundamentals. They have no alternative to propose to the cuts in social spending demanded by Wall Street.

Meanwhile, the supporters of public education, the youth and the working class, remain on the defensive, lacking a program or perspective with which to oppose Giuliani's attacks.

The big business politicians are specialists in turning the victim into the criminal. In this case, working class youth are the victims of the bipartisan budget cuts, yet the same politicians who have voted for these cuts now turn around and bemoan the fact that many students are not prepared for college work!

An important element in the assault on public higher education is the appeal to the bygone days when New York's city colleges were known as the 'Harvard of the poor,' as the article points out. I'd like to underscore the sinister demagoguery behind the comparison, which is designed to drive a wedge between working people,

pitting the descendants of previous immigrant generations against today's immigrants and minority workers and youth.

Until the late 1960s the city colleges generally selected the most highly motivated and prepared students. The large majority of high school graduates did not go on to college. In the prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s there were plenty of jobs for such high school graduates without college degrees. The change in the composition of the student body, elsewhere as well as in New York, is directly related to the disappearance of millions of manufacturing and other blue-collar and semi-skilled jobs.

With an influx of immigrant students and large numbers from the city's poorest neighborhoods into the city colleges, more assistance was needed. Instead these students got less, from their very first days in kindergarten and first grade all the way to their years in college. The generation of 'open admissions' has coincided with the imposition of tuition for the first time at the city colleges; the skyrocketing of tuition costs over the past decade, which has forced thousands of students to leave school, while others must stay six years or more to complete their course load; and the replacement of full-time professors with poorly-paid adjuncts who are themselves the victims of a kind of sweatshop educational system. In the primary and secondary schools the situation in New York City is a national scandal. Years of budget cuts coupled with the growth of the student population due to immigration have led to classrooms in closets and bathrooms, crumbling school buildings, lack of the most elementary supplies, and a growing teacher shortage.

Thus the concept of 'open admissions' has been shown to be a fraud, and that must be said. It proved not to be even the limited reform promised. It became a

diversion, designed to suggest that the system was working while in fact the students were being deprived of all the tools they needed for education. Furthermore, to the extent that open admissions became associated with such 'innovations' as ethnic studies and identity politics, it also undermines the struggle for a decent education for all.

I would like to add my agreement and elaborate on another point which the article advances: even if many of the obvious roadblocks to decent education could somehow be removed, they are only part of a broader crisis of poverty and social polarization. It is also necessary to see the 'lowering of standards' as a product of the forces at work in popular culture--the ridiculing of intellectual interests, the dumbing down of the news media, the worship of the market and the accumulation of wealth which are depicted, especially to the working class, as antithetical to the goals of learning and enlightenment.

The attack on the City University is part of the relentless campaign for privatization of public services, in which the inadequate and pathetic reforms of the past are held responsible for the crisis produced by capitalism. The capitalist politicians are moving to get out of the 'education business,' just as they are demanding the privatization or closings of municipal hospitals and the elimination of welfare. The strategy is very similar: starve the public services for funds, then complain that they are not needed or not doing their job, and use this to justify further cuts or even the elimination of those public institutions which remain.

In the case of the city colleges, the logic of the current proposals is the closure of some or all of the four-year colleges. The better-off sections of the population make use of private colleges and, in New York, of the State University. Big business has little interest in the education of millions of working class and immigrant youth, so the schools they attend can be dispensed with. This is the meaning of board chairwoman Paolucci's not-so-veiled racist reference to 'cleaning out the four-year colleges.' This can be read as cleaning out the remediation courses, but it obviously implies 'cleaning out' the poor, the black, the Hispanic and the immigrant.

The policies of Pataki and Giuliani have a definite logic--a return to the days of the nineteenth century, before public higher education, medical care for the

poor, and so on. This is the unvarnished policy of big business, and the only answer must be, as the article states in conclusion, 'a mass political movement of the working class challenging the very bases of the profit system.'

See Also:

City University of New York ends open admissions
[18 July 1998]

Wisconsin court permits aid to religious schools

The right-wing politics behind school vouchers
[24 June 1998]



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