

Toronto teacher discusses worldwide assault on public education

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I read with great interest your interview with a teacher regarding the recent Detroit education strike (*Teacher discusses lessons of the Detroit strike*, 20 October). It's obviously important for the teachers, students, educational workers and parents of Detroit to recognize the seriousness of the present threat to their education system, but I think it's even more critical to understand that these are by no means isolated developments. The current attack on the Detroit school system is part of a world-wide assault on universal public education. As a teacher in a major Canadian public system just a few hundred miles from Detroit, I have been through many similar experiences to those described in the interview, and thought it would be worth offering a perspective on the educational crisis in this country.

For the past decade I have taught English and Media Literacy in a 2,000-student high school a few minutes from downtown Toronto. The school is in a comfortable middle class neighborhood, and draws its students from both middle-class and working-class families. In most respects it is a relatively privileged school, and has not been as deeply affected by cutbacks and other structural changes as many others in the city or province. Even so, with the worst of the scheduled funding cuts still to come, the consequences have been enormous. In the time I have been in the school, the caretaking staff has been cut by two-thirds. Washrooms are filthy, often not even stocked with toilet paper or other supplies. Classroom floors are washed at most three times a year. The heating system is so badly maintained that many classrooms are either intolerably hot or so cold that students are forced to wear coats in class. Throughout the school, air quality is so poor that a variety of respiratory problems have become commonplace among both students and staff.

The deteriorating physical condition of the school is symptomatic of far deeper problems. Guidance and counselling services have been drastically cut, and the school no longer has a nurse, psychometrist or psychologist on staff. The community-based youth counselling service which maintains an office in the school has also had its school board funding revoked, and will be forced to close at the end of the present school year. As any education worker knows, having such services within a school is the only way to assure that at-risk students receive the help they need. Removing these services guarantees that thousands of students will soon enough find their way either to prison or the morgue.

Funding and service cuts have also seriously affected the classroom. Budgets for books and supplies have been slashed to the bone, and teachers are routinely forced to cobble together alternative curricula when insufficient textbooks and learning materials are available. Special education services have been drastically scaled back, and teaching assistants all but eliminated. In innumerable ways, learning and teaching conditions have already degenerated so badly that many teachers acknowledge that they sometimes see their role as little more

than babysitter.

In developing a larger perspective of how such attacks on education can be happening in a time of unprecedented economic growth, one must recognize first that dismantling public education is part of a much larger political agenda being carried out all across the world. The statement by the subject of your interview that "Democratic and Republican politicians hate public education" is absolutely correct, but should more rightly be expanded to refer to every big business party in all the nations of the earth. Politicians and their capitalist masters the world over *despise* public education, and want to reestablish an education system based on class and privilege.

An essential lesson of the Detroit strike is that the government and school board have been able to carry out their attacks because of the full cooperation of the trade unions. In this regard, the experiences of Ontario teachers are worth enumerating.

For more than a decade, the Ontario education system has been subjected to a continual series of cutbacks and reactionary "reforms" by successive Liberal, New Democratic and Tory regimes. The cuts instituted by the Liberal government of David Peterson were stepped up greatly when the social democratic NDP government of Bob Rae came to power in 1990. The NDP began to implement a series of sweeping attacks on education carried out under the same banners of "reform" and "increased accountability" that Detroit teachers have encountered in the present confrontation. Many of the most reactionary measures since brought in by the Tory government of Mike Harris were in fact NDP initiatives, and former NDP cabinet minister David Cooke now heads Harris's Education Reform Commission.

The Tories made education a primary target for their slash-and-burn economic policies after they came to power in 1995. Early in his mandate, Harris launched the most concerted attack on public education in Canadian history when his government introduced Bill 160, the Education Quality Improvement Act, a 200-page document outlining measures to eliminate programs and services, cut thousands of jobs, increase the workload of teachers, reduce the number of school boards and give almost absolute power over all important decisions to the provincial cabinet.

When it became clear that the Tories had no interest in negotiating even relatively insignificant provisions of Bill 160, the leaders of the teachers unions were forced to seek endorsement to call a walkout in defiance of the anti-strike laws. The vote received almost 100 percent support, and a series of anti-160 rallies drew tens of thousands of teachers, parents and students to voice their opposition to the bill. Still the Tories refused to budge, and in October 1997 the largest education strike in North American history began when 126,000 teachers walked off the job.

From the outset, the strike received the overwhelming support of the

general population. This support grew each day, as the public came to see our struggle as a lightning rod for their anger against years of cuts to education, health care and other social services. Almost immediately the strike was transformed from an economic to a political confrontation, which threatened to bring down the Tories. Unable to keep the strike within the narrow confines of trade union negotiation, the union leaders moved quickly to sabotage it.

It isn't possible to detail here all the many ways the bureaucrats of the teacher unions and the Ontario Federation of Labour subverted the strike. The details are thoroughly outlined in a number of articles in the WSWs archive, particularly "The betrayal of the Ontario teachers' strike, (17 November 1997)." Suffice to say that in the end the strike was sold out in the most abject manner imaginable. In one case a union leader pulled her union out of the strike literally minutes after giving a crowd of more than 50,000 people her pledge of continued support. Not only did the Tories emerge with every major provision of Bill 160 intact, they actually added a number of punitive measures, including revocation of union membership for principals and vice-principals.

The years since the strike have seen a rapid deterioration in all aspects of the education system. The legal strictures of Bill 160 have given local school boards a fig leaf to justify their own cost-cutting agendas. The problems have been particularly acute in large cities such as Toronto and Ottawa, owing to Bill 160's imposition of a standard funding formula for all boards, despite the much higher operating costs in metropolitan centres.

In Toronto, the newly amalgamated Toronto District School Board used its supposed inability to pay as justification for demanding massive concessions in contract negotiations with high school teachers last year. Principal among its demands was the insistence that teachers give away half their preparation time in favour of an additional 75-minute teaching assignment every other day. In an agreement which Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) leaders hailed as a qualified victory, teachers were instead offered a contract in which preparation time would be restored only if we agreed to assume most of the duties that were previously the work of supply (substitute) teachers.

The many changes I've listed here scarcely hint at the depth of the present crisis in education. In effect, the very nature of teaching and learning is rapidly being transformed, from an essentially creative and spontaneous activity to a mechanical process as purposeless and dehumanizing as the nineteenth-century Utilitarianism satirized by Charles Dickens. Curriculum is increasingly knowledge-based, and standardized to the point that Ontario elementary teachers are now told that they must fulfill a preposterous total of more than 330 specific learning outcomes in a year. The point the Detroit teacher made summarizes the pressures teachers everywhere are facing: "The authorities say the schools should be run like General Motors and that we should forget we are dealing with the complexities of human development and deal with children like cars on an assembly line."

As a science teacher, the subject of your interview was able to provide a useful perspective on the increasing difficulties of teaching science under present conditions. Those of us teaching other subject areas feel similar pressures, including the pernicious influence of the Religious Right in course content. I was told recently by an educational consultant involved in curriculum implementation at the provincial level that she and a colleague had had literally to stage a pitched battle to keep Shakespeare from being removed from the high school English curriculum; other members of the committee, it seems,

were concerned that his work might impart "bad values" to teenagers.

In a general sense, in all subjects creativity, personal expression and critical thought are consistently downgraded. Programs in art, drama, music and other fields of creative expression are condemned as "frills," and slated for closure. The draft version of the new Ontario grade nine English curriculum specified that no more than one-quarter of class time be spent on literature, which was defined as including "pamphlets, emails, web sites and other information texts."

Inevitably, the move to a system based on rote learning is accompanied by an increasing reliance on standardized testing. The ultimate function of such tests is to witch-hunt "non-performing" schools (i.e., those in poor and immigrant neighbourhoods) in order to justify school closures and attacks on teachers. Almost two dozen Toronto public and Catholic schools are earmarked for closure next fall.

The crisis in education, then, is unmistakably part of a larger and deeply rooted social crisis. The experiences of Ontario teachers, like those of our colleagues in other countries, prove that teachers, students and the general public are more than willing to make the commitment and sacrifice to defend public education. As the Ontario experience unmistakably shows, however, this is a struggle which cannot be won in isolation, but which will entail a revolutionary transformation of society and the abolition of the capitalist market.

Any conscious worker must recognize that this is a struggle that requires the repudiation of both the trade unions and all big business parties, whatever their militant or social-democratic garb. As a vital stage in the building of a revolutionary consciousness, educators must establish contacts with their counterparts in other countries in order to develop common strategies and perspectives. I urge other teachers and education workers to follow the *World Socialist Web Site* daily, and to write in with your experiences.

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