

New Orleans: school staff face massive cuts in jobs, benefits

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The New Orleans Public School (NOPS) board is moving to break up the city's public school system and force through massive cuts to the jobs, pay and benefits of its workforce in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Operating behind closed doors, the NOPS board has rushed through long-standing plans to charter all 13 West Bank schools, effectively removing any obligations to the United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO) union. The union president, Brenda Mitchell, has indicated she supports this move and only cautioned, "I think we're rushing into this," according to an October 15 article in the *Times-Picayune*.

The new charter schools will hire new staff for as little pay as possible without any participation from the union. All the seniority rights, job security and negotiated salaries won by the union membership over the years have been thrown out the window. Plans are in the works to charter the East Bank schools as well.

The NOPS board also recently decided to drastically slash health-care coverage for those employees who are not currently working, requiring them to pay the first \$5,000 to \$10,000 of medical bills. Until now, a visit to the doctor's office costs a NOPS employee \$15. The cuts will spell disaster for school employees and their families, the vast majority of whom have already suffered huge financial losses as a result of Katrina.

The 7,000 NOPS employees affected by the health-care cuts have been on "Disaster Leave" without pay or benefits (except, until now, health care) since August 29. Since only 26 of those employees have been asked to return to work so far, the cuts, effective December 1, affect nearly all NOPS employees. Some workers have

gone without a proper paycheck for work performed *before* August 29, since the computer systems containing payroll data were damaged in the floods.

Alvarez & Marsal, the corporate "turnaround" firm that proposed the gutting of health benefits, has an 18-month contract with the city of New Orleans, dating back to before Katrina, to carry through similar cuts across the board. A&M may be reimbursed \$4.2 million for their efforts by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). It is estimated the new health-care plan will save the school system \$1.7 million a month.

The drive to break up the New Orleans public school system is entirely in line with the Bush administration's priorities for the nation's schoolchildren. The federal government has recently announced that \$20.9 million in federal grant money will be available for Louisiana charter schools only. Federal and state officials are collaborating to take advantage of the disaster in New Orleans to stampede through changes they have sought to implement for years, effectively turning the devastated city into a showcase for their reactionary privatization agenda for education.

Even before the hurricane, the New Orleans public schools were in crisis. Louisiana teachers' pay has been on a downward slide for years, sinking from 43rd in the nation to 46th since 2001, according to a report released October 6 by the American Federation of Teachers. A teacher beginning work in Louisiana before the hurricane could expect to earn on average \$29,655 annually. Now, after months without pay or benefits, teachers will return to work to be paid even

less with fewer benefits.

The move by the board to cut health care is especially cruel when one considers many of the teachers facing the cuts have been personally affected by the hurricane and flooding--now is when they will need their health benefits the most!

Without pay, benefits, health care, union rights--or any guarantee that they will be rehired in the new "chartered" system--virtually the entire public school workforce has been cut loose. Callous indifference has also been shown to the 55,000 students who formerly attended New Orleans public schools. Some of the displaced students have been assimilated into other public schools in the area and around the country, but many will go months without attending classes.

Up to eight out of thirteen schools are expected to reopen on the West Bank, but the opening date has been pushed back from November 1 to November 17, and may be pushed back again. Schools on the East Bank will open at the earliest in January.

Some teachers have also expressed concerns that the schools have not been adequately repaired and cleaned for the returning students and teachers. Toxic mold could be growing in the walls, and playgrounds have not been tested for poisonous substances.

Public officials continuously cite a lack of financial resources and the extreme circumstances surrounding the hurricane as justifications for these ruinous transformations. The Bush administration insists that any federal money spent on rebuilding New Orleans be offset by cuts to other public spending. In reality, however, if one day's worth of the money spent on the war in Iraq were diverted to the stricken city, the 13 West Bank schools could open tomorrow, with raises for the teachers instead of cuts.



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