A letter and response on the California Teachers Association

11 June 2008

The following letter was sent to the World Socialist Web Site *in response to the article,* "California teachers protest budget cuts"*, followed by a reply from the WSWS.*

I strongly disagree with your assertion that the California Teachers Association's response has been little more than a letter writing campaign and appeals to Democratic legislators. Read the newspapers for Thursday, May 14. CTA members, at a local, grassroots level, organized protests, rallies and marches all over the state on the California Day of the Teacher. I know because I am a dues paying CTA member, not a CTA staffer or officer, and I organized a 200+ person march in tandem with other members and education coalition partners all over the state. You may disagree with CTA's politics or ethics, but you need to get your facts straight.

JN

16 May 2008

Dear Ms. Nichols,

Thank you for your comments of May 16. For the sake of clarification, the article you refer to was written on April 9, at which time the California Teachers Organization, (by which we mean the centralized organization, not individual members who may or may not act in congruence with it), had not organized any mass actions against the cuts.

Much more important than this factual question, however, are the political conclusions drawn by the article. You note that we oppose the politics and ethics of the CTA, but you do not say whether you concur with our assessment.

To reiterate, the article stated, "The unions are incapable of organizing the growing opposition and anger in the working class against the school closures and layoffs because they are tied to the Democratic Party and the profit system." This incapacity manifests itself in the established policy of the CTA leadership, which is to offer limited opposition to the cuts primarily in the form of public statements and ad campaigns. Yet even as far as such actions go, what the CTA offers is mealy-mouthed and toothless.

CTA President David Sanchez, for example, recently made the following statement in response to Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's May budget proposal: "Let's be clear, this revised budget proposal still cuts billions of dollars from public education," which was followed by, "We look forward to working with the Legislature and the governor in passing a state budget that invests in the future of our children, our schools, and our state." In other words, the CTA is still determined to work in collaboration with the Democratic and Republican politicians.

The idea that any real gains can be made without a relentless struggle against these political forces is completely bankrupt. After Schwarzenegger reduced legally mandated funding for education by $2 billion soon after the 2003 recall campaign, for example, he agreed to return the funding when the state next experienced a budget surplus. When the funding was not returned, the CTA responded by publicly opposing the right-wing ballot initiatives of the Schwarzenegger administration in 2005. The funding still hasn't been returned to this day, however, and the CTA now remains completely silent on the issue.

Furthermore, soon after their 2005 opposition, the CTA, which ostensibly represents the interests of teachers, publicly opposed the passage of Proposition 88, which would have provided K-12 schools with an additional $450 million in funding per year.

It should also be noted that the CTA is an affiliate of the National Education Association. The NEA was largely responsible for the enactment of child labor laws in the 1890s, compulsory education, and the introduction of state pensions in the first half of the last century.

More recently, however, the NEA has proven itself utterly incapable of presenting any meaningful opposition to regressive education policies, including the No Child

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Left Behind Act, which is widely hated by teachers and students alike. As the bill comes up for revision and renewal, the NEA has quibbled over various funding levels, but has not said a word about the bill's underlying premise, which is to lay the foundation for the complete privatization of the nation's education system. The Act will further erode the separation of church and state through taxpayer-funded school vouchers that place students into religious and other private institutions.

Furthermore, No Child Left Behind was passed in 2001 with overwhelming bipartisan support in both the House and Senate. Among those voting in favor were Democratic California Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein, along with Democratic Representatives Lynn Woolsey, Nancy Pelosi, and Adam Schiff. A total of 45 out of 51 California representatives voted in favor, with only two Democrats voting against. More than 90 percent of the NEA and CTA's campaign contributions go to Democratic politicians.

It should also be noted that the CTA's sympathy for other members of the working class who are affected by the budget crisis has been entirely rhetorical in nature. It is their stated policy not to actually fight the cuts but to merely "keep the cuts away from the classroom."

The movement that is building up among teachers, parents, and students who are fighting against this state of affairs is thus a world apart from the CTA. The CTA's more recent involvement does nothing to change the fact that they play a vital role in making sure that these marches and genuine outpourings of anger stay within the safe limits of the capitalist two-party system. The last thing the government and its trade union appendages like the CTA want is an independent mobilization of the working class.

There are broader issues at stake in the struggle of California teachers and students against the budget cuts. These cuts are part of an international attack by the ruling elite on the right to a free, high quality education for all. In Britain, France, and countless other countries, teachers and students have begun to mobilize against these attacks. Their grievances are fundamentally the same, and the root cause of the crisis is the slump in global capitalism, which has only just begun.

Over the past few decades, public education in the United States has been thoroughly compromised by large corporations that seek to turn schools and universities into profit-making enterprises. Standardized testing, student debt, and No Child Left Behind are the latest stages of this process.

The present assault on public education is part of an overall attack on the working class, whether through the medium of high gas prices, reductions in health benefits, or the rising tide of home foreclosures. The ruling elite is responding to the economic crisis by seeking to claw back any social reforms or benefits that it granted to the working class in a previous period, and this includes education. Any effort to address the education crisis both in California and across the world that does not address this broader context will be derailed.

How then do we propose to fight these cuts? Every child has the right to the highest quality, public education from preschool up to university level. Education is a social right, and in modern society an absolute necessity. However, the educational needs of the population cannot be guaranteed within the framework of an economic system that subordinates everything to the demands of profit accumulation and individual wealth. It is precisely for this reason that the perspective of the trade unions—which defend the capitalist system and support the Democratic Party—is bankrupt.

Today, the defense and expansion of the right to education is a revolutionary question that cannot be resolved through protests directed at the two parties of big business. What is required is the independent mobilization of the working class to reorganize the world economy and human society on a socialist basis. This is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site.*

Sincerely,

Kevin Martinez and Dan Conway

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