Obama tailors community college plan to corporate interests

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In a speech delivered Tuesday on the campus of Macomb Community College in Warren, Michigan, Barack Obama unveiled the American Graduation Initiative (AGI). The initiative proposes to coordinate the educational goals of community colleges with the interests of the corporate elite in order to provide the latter with a larger cadre of technically trained workers from which to recruit.

The central component of Obama's plan, providing $12 billion in funding to community colleges by 2020, is an effort by Obama to restore America's position as the nation with "the highest proportion of college graduates in the world."

The title of the program, and the exclusion of four-year universities from access to the funds, are indicators of Obama's central purpose. His aim is not to enable low income individuals to transfer to four-year universities, but to encourage them to seek associates' degrees and certifications from community colleges as an end in itself.

"We know," says Obama, "the most successful community colleges are those that partner with the private sector. We want to encourage more companies to work with schools to build these types of relationships. That way, when someone goes through a training program, they know that there's a job at the end of the training."

One of the "key aspects of the plan," leaked by members of Obama's administration to the *Michigan Messenger*, is to "[c]reate a community college challenge fund which will allow community colleges to partner with businesses and industry..."

The AGI plan involves "innovative, *results-oriented* strategies in exchange for federal funding" (emphasis added). This wording is particularly significant, as it is similar to that of Bush's unpopular No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative, which linked funding for public K-12 education to its own "results-oriented" strategies. In the case of NCLB, that meant standardized testing. With Obama's plan it is clear that the private sector will be given wide leeway to develop its own metric for gauging what constitutes fund-worthy results.

Obama's plan will thus give privately owned corporations a substantial role in developing the curriculum and the "goals and plans" of the community colleges that will be the recipients of public funds. The allocation of the $12 billion will be contingent on the ability of various schools to comply with the wishes of the businesses that are operating in conjuncture with community college administrators.

Obama is attempting to present himself as an advocate of education in Michigan even as his administration is supporting the attack on public education throughout the state. The Democratic-run city government in Detroit is, with the backing of the Obama administration, planning to cut 40 schools and layoff hundreds of teachers, while expanding privately-run charter schools.

It is telling that the word "art" was not mentioned a single time in Obama's speech. Nor were the words "history", "politics", "philosophy" or "literature." Nor were any indirect references made to these vital aspects of any well-rounded education.

There is an element of audacity in the content of Obama's speech, delivered in the epicenter of the economic crisis and coming immediately on the wake of Obama's own draconian restructuring of auto giants General Motors (GM) and Chrysler.

At 14.1 percent as of May, Michigan has the highest unemployment rate of any state in the nation. If

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workers who have given up looking for a job (discouraged workers) and part time workers who would prefer to be working full time are included, Michigan's unemployment rate jumps to the depression-era level of 21.5 percent.

Warren, where Obama delivered his speech, has an official unemployment rate close to 20 percent.

"Some of those jobs that have been lost in the auto industry and elsewhere," Obama admitted in his speech, "won't be coming back. They are the casualties of a changing economy, and in some cases just the increased productivity in the plant themselves."

These "casualties," as Obama calls them, are the product of his own policies, in accordance with the interests of the financial aristocracy he unfalteringly defends. Only with the backing of Obama could GM have moved through bankruptcy court in 42 days, shedding obligations and preparing the way for a new round of job cuts and plant closings.

Yet, Obama hypocritically touted as a monumental accomplishment the speed with which he pushed GM and Chrysler through bankruptcy courts. "Now today," he says, "after a painful period of soul-searching and sacrifice, both GM and Chrysler have emerged from bankruptcy. Remember those folks who were saying they couldn't do it? Well we did it, and in record time."

The reality of the GM and Chrysler deals belies the claims Obama made in his Tuesday speech. When Obama says that GM and Chrysler "have a leaner structure" that is nothing more than a euphemism for the jobs the company has shed, with his help. When he claims that "sacrifices were shared among all the stakeholders: workers and management; creditors and shareholders; retirees and communities," he is telling an outright lie. Workers did not have a voice in this process, and if they had it would not have gotten out of bankruptcy court "in record time." In fact, the large bondholders will get back their entire investment, while the workers will be left holding the bag.

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