

Socialism and the defense of public education

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The Obama administration is spearheading an unprecedented assault on public education in the US. While providing trillions of dollars to Wall Street, Obama has starved states and local governments of funding and pressed them to address their soaring budget deficits by closing public schools and opening semi-private charter schools.

In Michigan and other states, school districts are slashing jobs and eliminating essential services such as student transportation. The school week in Hawaii has been reduced to four days due to teacher furloughs. The cutbacks have been extended to higher education as well, with California leading the way by imposing a 32 percent tuition increase.

What little federal funding the Obama administration has made available—a meager \$4 billion in its “Race to the Top” program—is contingent on school districts dropping restrictions on the expansion of charter schools and tying school funding and teachers’ pay to standardized test scores.

The catastrophe facing the public schools is the culmination of three decades of attacks on education, which has coincided with a general assault on the social position and democratic rights of the working class. The assault began in earnest in the 1980s with Reagan, who halved the federal share of education funding. It continued with Clinton’s promotion of charter schools and “school choice” in the 1990s and Bush’s “No Child Left Behind Act,” co-sponsored by Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy.

It has no doubt come as a shock to many teachers and supporters of public education that the current administration, elected by appealing to popular sentiment for an end to social reaction and exploiting the belief that an African-American president would be more sympathetic to working people, has become the vehicle for an even more ruthless attack on the public schools. However, the assault on education is of a piece with all of Obama’s policies, including the escalation of war and the further enrichment of the financial aristocracy.

The policies of Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, represent a repudiation of the basic democratic principle that all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, have the right to a free, quality education. The administration is spearheading the transformation of

education into a largely privatized system, with government subsidies provided to charter schools which are designed to educate only a fraction of working class youth. The rest are condemned to schools that are more like holding pens than centers of learning.

Quality education is fast becoming a privilege of the few, not the right of all.

Detroit, the poorest major city in the US, has become a focal point of this attack. Working closely with the Obama administration as well as the American Federation of Teachers and its Detroit local, the school district’s state-appointed “emergency financial director” has just imposed a contract that forces each teacher to “loan” the district \$10,000 from their pay over the next two years. The contract will accelerate the closing of so-called “failing schools” and the firing of experienced teachers, combined with the establishment of “priority schools” for a select section of students.

Conditions of mass unemployment in the former center of world auto production, compounded by aged and inadequately maintained school buildings and a shameful dearth of basic tools such as books, computers, labs, etc., have led to falling test scores and plummeting graduation rates. Far from seeking to reverse this disaster, the politicians and school administrators have utilized the crisis to scapegoat the teachers and undermine public confidence in the public school system.

This is a deliberate class policy. The American ruling elite, dominated by a fabulously rich and corrupt financial oligarchy, has no intention of investing money to educate large sections of working class youth who face a future of unemployment or poverty-level wages.

The most critical measure of the health of a society is the value it places and resources it dedicates to raising the cultural and intellectual level of the next generation. The state of public education in the US is an indictment of capitalist society.

Social equality and education

The establishment of public schools in the US was the product of the revolutionary struggles of the 18th and 19th centuries against social inequality and oppression. The greatest leaders of the American Revolution believed that every individual had innate potential, which could be realized if he was provided with the means to gain knowledge and training. Thomas Jefferson in 1779 proposed a bill for the “more general diffusion of knowledge.” It called for the establishment of free public schools. This, he said, would “bring into action that mass of talents which lies buried in poverty in every country for want of the means of development ...”

An educated populace, the American revolutionaries believed, was the only means to prevent tyranny and oppression. The public cost for establishing a system of free schools, Jefferson said, would be “not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance.”

The fighters for public education—from the “father of the common school” Horace Mann, the abolitionist Thaddeus Stevens and the philosopher John Dewey, to the early working class and socialist leaders and the pioneers of the civil rights movement—were driven by a profound belief that every child—whether a former slave, child laborer or working class immigrant—should and could be educated, and that the continued existence of democracy depended on it.

Today, the American corporate and political establishment has repudiated this egalitarian conception. In its eyes, the cost of educating tens of millions of working class youth—especially in the inner cities—is an intolerable infringement on its wealth. This misanthropic class policy is camouflaged by invocations to “individual responsibility.” As Obama—who has made his career and his millions by lending his services to the rich and powerful—has repeatedly declared, poverty and decaying schools are “no excuse for failure.”

The assault on public education is the outcome of the growth of social inequality in America, which, in turn, is the most perverse expression of the decay of American and world capitalism. The immense and growing chasm between the top 1 percent of society and the broad mass of the population is incompatible with democracy. The destruction of public education is a profound expression of the terminal crisis of democracy in the US.

The US financial aristocracy, parasitic and criminal in its social and economic essence, exercises a de facto dictatorship, dominating both parties and every political institution. It is organically hostile to democratic principles.

The impact of decades of political reaction, the collapse of the old labor movement and the semi-criminalization of

socialist politics and thought have blighted intellectual and cultural life. The critical and oppositionist liberal intelligentsia of the past has long since ceased to exist. On basic issues of policy, the Democratic and Republican parties have become virtually indistinguishable, as exemplified by the Obama administration’s continuation of the militarist and pro-corporate policies of the Bush administration.

No section of the political establishment is committed to the defense of democratic rights, including the right to a decent education.

As for the unions, they have become corporatist partners in the destruction of the living standards of social conditions of the working class. The American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association have signed on to the anti-education and anti-teacher policies of the corporate elite and the government, hoping thereby to secure the salaries and perks of the union executives.

The crisis of public education in the US is deeply rooted in the crisis of the existing economic and political system. The fight to defend education is a political and revolutionary question.

Public education can be defended only through the struggle for socialism. This means the mobilization of the working class to break the grip of the financial aristocracy and establish the democratic control of working people over economic and political life. This is the only way to allocate the wealth produced by the working class and utilize the immense technological and human resources that already exist to improve the schools and raise the economic and cultural level of the people, instead of their being plundered for the benefit of a modern-day aristocracy.

The fight of teachers, students and parents to defend public education is a political struggle against the Obama administration, the Democrats and Republicans, and the capitalist system, which they defend.

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