

Unite New York City teachers, students, workers to stop school closings and cuts

Socialist Equality Party
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Defying citywide protests, New York's billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg is escalating school closings and budget cuts. These attacks go hand in hand with layoffs, wage cuts, home foreclosures, hospital closings and public transportation cutbacks. Working people are being forced to bear the burden of an economic crisis they did not create, paying for the bailout of the bankers who did.

No prominent Democrat or Republican has come forward to defend public education. After a January 26 mass meeting in which not one person spoke in favor of the Department of Education's plan to close 19 schools, the shutdowns were approved by the Panel for Education Policy controlled by Bloomberg. Still more school closings are planned.

This is not just Bloomberg's policy, but that of the Democrats in Albany and Washington as well. Democratic Governor David Paterson is demanding a \$1.4 billion education cut in New York state. President Barack Obama is driving this assault, expanding his "Race to the Top" program to replace Bush's "No Child Left Behind" act with an even more reactionary agenda. It makes federal funding for school districts conditional on closing traditional public schools in favor of charter schools (publicly funded but privately managed) and paying teachers based on the scores of their students—measures that will widen inequality in the school system.

Since 2002, Mayor Bloomberg and his schools chancellor, Joel Klein, have closed 111 schools in New York City, the largest school district in the US, while pushing to reach Bloomberg's stated goal of moving 10 percent of the city's 1 million students into charter schools.

As the January 26 hearing demonstrated, opposition to these policies has become explosive. There is

growing recognition that the changes billed as "reforms" are creating a divided, class-based system in which schools are expected to sink or swim without help or necessary resources.

The result will be a small section of students who can fill the needs of business for professional and managerial staff, while the mass of students receive only narrow training, condemned either to low-wage service jobs or unemployment. Even if the protests against school closings had been successful, the schools are being devastated by budget cuts that come on top of years of underfunding. Cuts for New York City schools in this and the coming school year may be as great as \$900 million.

One of the most malicious attacks has been the Metropolitan Transit Authority's threat to take away the transportation passes needed by some 500,000 students to reach their schools on the subways and buses.

Meanwhile, Bloomberg is warning teachers that 8,500 jobs may be cut if they do not accept major concessions in their overdue contract. These cuts will only worsen already intolerable conditions for students. Class sizes have grown in all grades and in all boroughs of New York City, faster than at any time in the last 11 years. Bloomberg has ignored a 2006 court ruling that \$760 million in state funds be used to lower class size.

Public education policy based on profit interests can be defended only by means of fraud. New York state test scores, which are used to determine which schools will close and which teachers will receive performance pay, have been deliberately inflated.

As a consequence of this Enron-style education accounting, students are pushed on without receiving a basic education, and a growing number of them leave the system entirely. The Community Service Society

has estimated that there are as many as 200,000 New Yorkers between the ages of 16 and 24 who have both failed to graduate high school and are unable to find work.

The decimation of public education is a direct result of government policy designed by and for the corporate elite. The closing of comprehensive schools in favor of smaller schools was seeded by \$51 million in funds donated in 2003 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. During the 2008 presidential election, the foundations of Gates and fellow billionaire Eli Broad contributed \$24 million to back candidates, including Obama, who favored charters, performance pay, and ending tenure for teachers.

This push for charter schools is not a matter of improving education, but rather reflects the drive by the financial elite to lay hold of the \$500 billion in tax-derived education funding nationally, and \$20 billion in New York City, for private profit. Ultimately, their goal is the destruction of public education through privatization.

The school closings and push for charters worsen the conditions in the traditional, comprehensive schools, providing justification for still more schools to be branded as “failures” and shut down. Special education and English language learners, turned away by the small schools, are funneled into already overburdened public schools. Meanwhile, the number of homeless students, who face enough disruption of their lives without their schools being closed, has also been on the rise.

Even the best-intentioned educational reforms cannot solve the crisis in the public schools, which is only part of the crisis of a class society characterized by social inequality.

To defend public education, the working class needs a political program directed against a system that guarantees billions in bonuses for bank executives while closing public schools and starving them of funds.

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) cannot and will not defend schools or teachers’ jobs and conditions because it is part of this system. Rather than oppose the privatization strategy implicit in the expansion of charter schools, the UFT has opened three of its own as models of how the unions can cooperate with private management in return for maintaining the union dues

base.

The UFT bureaucracy is fully integrated into the Democratic Party, while last November it provided tacit backing for Bloomberg’s re-election.

A fight to defend public education requires a political break with the Democrats and Republicans and the bureaucratized unions that support them.

An independent mobilization is needed, uniting all sections of working people in New York City and across the state to halt cuts to public education and to demand that hundreds of billions of dollars be transferred from Wall Street’s profits and bonuses to rebuild the schools, hire more teachers at decent salaries and provide what is needed to assure a quality education for all.

This means a struggle for a new form of social organization that starts with social need rather than private profit and in which the main levers of the economy, including the banks, are publicly owned and democratically controlled. It is a struggle for the only alternative to capitalism, that is, socialism.

The Socialist Equality Party calls upon students, teachers and workers to initiate mass resistance to the attack on education. We call for the organization of demonstrations and strikes and other forms of mass action to halt school closings, charter invasions and cutbacks. Action committees should be formed in the communities and schools to fight for the broadest possible mobilization.

This struggle must be guided by a new political strategy based on a break from the Democrats and the two-party system and the building of a mass independent political movement of the working class to fight for a workers’ government.

We urge all those who agree with these policies to join the SEP and help build the new socialist leadership of the working class.



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