

Obama's assault on public education

Jerry White
4 March 2010

President Obama's public support for the mass firing of teachers at a Rhode Island high school is a declaration of war on all teachers and on the working class as a whole.

No US president has so openly supported the mass victimization of workers since Ronald Reagan fired the PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981. Obama's intervention against the teachers at Central Falls High School is motivated by similarly reactionary aims.

Speaking before an audience of business executives at the US Chamber of Commerce on Monday, Obama hailed the decision to fire the entire teaching and support staff at Central Falls High after they rejected demands to work extra hours without pay.

He defended such measures as critical to implementing the national strategy of Education Secretary Arne Duncan to deal with 5,000 of the nation's "lowest performing" schools, overwhelmingly located in the most impoverished areas of the country. In order to qualify for federal funding, school districts have the option of closing a school outright, handing it over to a charter school or school management company, imposing a longer school day and other attacks on teachers, or firing the staff and rehiring only half back.

Pointing to the 74 teachers and 19 other school employees in Central Falls, Obama insisted that teachers had to be held "accountable."

The White House made no similar demands of the Wall Street bankers who brought the US and world economy to the brink of collapse. None of them were fired. Instead, they were handed the keys of the US Treasury to reward themselves with record bonuses.

The Rhode Island firings are meant to serve as an object lesson and warning to any teachers who dare oppose the destruction of their working conditions and wages and the government's efforts to undermine and privatize the schools.

Obama's hostility to the teachers reveals his real attitude toward working class students. Teachers, who already make countless sacrifices for their students each day, are not

responsible for the collapse of public education in poverty-stricken cities like Central Falls.

They are being used as scapegoats for the inevitable outcome of decades of government policies aimed at starving the public schools and encouraging the growth of privately run charter schools and for-profit schools. Teachers are not to blame for shutting schools, eliminating programs and increasing class sizes.

This anti-education agenda is being expanded by Obama. His administration is dedicated to carrying through the long sought program of the Republican right to gut the public schools and make decent education a privilege of the wealthy, rather than a right of all.

In order to pay for the Wall Street bailout, the administration is presiding over massive cuts in public school systems across the country, along with reductions in other vitally needed social services. In recent days, school boards have announced the following measures:

- The Los Angeles Unified School District voted Tuesday to send out layoff notices to 5,200 teachers and other school employees.
- San Francisco officials announced 900 teachers and staff would receive pink slips.
- Detroit's emergency financial director Robert Bobb said he would close 40 schools, on top of 29 targeted last year and privatize student transportation. Earlier, district teachers were forced to take a \$10,000 pay cut over two years.
- The Kansas City, Missouri school district announced this week the closing of 26 of the city's 61 schools and the firing of nearly one-fourth of its employees.

The administrators who are witch-hunting the teachers are, for the most part, making salaries well into the six figures. Detroit's Robert Bobb just received an \$81,000 raise, bringing his salary to \$425,000.

The administration's agenda was summed up in the comments of Education Secretary Duncan, who last month said

Hurricane Katrina had been the “best thing that happened” to the New Orleans school system. Nearly 60 percent of the city’s public school students now attend charter schools—the highest percentage of any American city—and school officials hope to raise that to 75 percent in coming years.

Public education was a conquest of the working class, achieved through decades of mass struggles. The right of all youth, regardless of economic status, national origin or race, to a decent public education was seen as a central component of democracy.

It is precisely the egalitarian aspect of public education that has long been the target of the most right-wing political forces, including free market economist Milton Friedman, who denounced the public schools as a “socialist enterprise” run by the teachers’ unions. Their repeated efforts to introduce a class-based education system, however, were rebuffed time and again by the population, which Friedman denounced for its “collectivist outlook.”

The Obama administration is implementing the agenda previously associated with the Republican right. This is highlighted by the national speaking tour to promote school “reform” carried out jointly by Duncan and the former Republican speaker of the House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich.

Obama’s election was supported by large sections of the ruling class because, in part, they believed a Democratic administration could better enlist the support of the unions in carrying through historic attacks on the working class.

The American Federation of Teachers and other unions have signed on to the anti-education and anti-democratic agenda of the administration, in return for guarantees for the union officials’ own positions and bloated incomes. They have become partners in the destruction of public education and the jobs and living standards of teachers, just as the United Auto Workers has become the business partner of the auto companies in imposing near-poverty wages and mass layoffs on the auto workers.

There is growing popular opposition to these attacks. Thousands of parents have packed school board meetings and organized protests in New York, Michigan, Missouri and other states to oppose school cuts. Today, thousands of college and high school students, along with school employees, will participate in protests across California to oppose a 32 percent tuition increase at the state university system and other cuts in education.

Quality education for all can be secured only by allocating

trillions of dollars to hire teachers and staff at decent wages and benefits, reduce class sizes, repair older schools and build new ones, and equip all schools with the most up-to-date learning tools.

Such measures will never be carried out by the Democratic Party, which, no less than the Republican Party, is a political instrument of the financial elite. Obama’s election campaign, based on his claim to represent “change” and “hope,” was a fraud. He was handpicked by powerful corporate interests in part because they calculated they could use his African American background to dupe workers and youth into thinking he would be more sympathetic to the needs of working people.

Hardly a year after its inauguration, the Obama administration has, in terms of its policies, proven to be the most right-wing government in modern American history. The defense of education requires a direct struggle against Obama, as well as the two parties of big business and the profit system which they defend.

This can be carried out only through the building of a mass independent party of the working class.

Access to high-quality and free schooling, like every other democratic right, is incompatible with the vast social inequality produced by capitalism. A fundamental and revolutionary transformation of society is needed to break the grip of the financial aristocracy and reorganize economic life to meet human needs, not private profit.

The Socialist Equality Party is holding an Emergency Conference on the Social Crisis and War in Detroit on April 17 and 18 to elaborate a socialist program to defend the working class and a strategy for building a mass political movement in the US and internationally to fight for it. We urge our readers—in particular, teachers, students, parents and all those involved in the struggle to defend public education—to attend. For more information or to register, click here.

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