

# Obama spearheads nationwide assault on public schools

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The Obama administration is spearheading an unprecedented assault on public education in the US. The White House and Education Secretary Arne Duncan are promoting a nationwide wave of school closures, teacher and staff layoffs, attacks on teachers' wages and conditions, and an expansion of privately run charter schools—all in the guise of education “reform.”

This agenda is being carried out in school districts across the country over the angry opposition of students, parents and teachers. At a highly-charged meeting packed with parents and teachers on Wednesday in Kansas City, Missouri, the district's school board voted to endorse a plan by the superintendent to shut down 28 of the city's 61 schools and to cut 700 of 3,000 jobs, including 285 teachers' jobs.

Enrollment in Kansas City Schools has eroded in large part through the siphoning off of students by charter and private schools. Kansas City, with a population of 480,000, presently has about the same number of public school students, 17,000, as were enrolled in 1890 when the city population was just over 132,000. This is down from a high of 77,000 students in 1964.

In Detroit, a proposed plan by a coalition called “Excellent Schools Detroit” would shut down and sell off as many as 70 public schools and open up charter schools in their stead. Detroit Public Schools Emergency Financial Director Robert Bobb has endorsed the business-backed scheme. Bobb, who has overseen the closure of dozens of schools and a huge cut in Detroit teachers' pay, has won warm praise from Obama and Education Secretary Duncan.

The *Detroit News* on Thursday quoted Bobb as saying that he is “open to chartering DPS (Detroit Public School system) schools, selling buildings to charter school operators and turning schools over to charter operators.” In praise of the plan, Bobb told the *News*, “It has a very strong market-driven component to it.”

In California, school districts across the state are handing out thousands of pink slips to teachers in advance of the March 15 deadline when all public school employees must be notified of potential layoffs. The Los Angeles Unified School District, which faces a \$640 million budget gap, voted March 2 to send layoff notices to more than 5,200 employees, including teachers, support staff and management.

On March 4 in Massachusetts, the state's Department of Education released a list of 35 schools where the jobs and contracts of teachers are directly threatened by the Obama administration's policy of closing down so-called

“underperforming” schools. The Boston Public Schools responded by ordering teachers at six of these schools to reapply for their jobs.

Cash-strapped school districts nationwide are grappling with growing budget shortfalls at both the local and state level. “NBC Nightly News” reported Thursday that school officials in at least 34 of the 50 states have carried out cuts. Sixty-six percent of school districts across the country have cut jobs this year, while 83 percent project cuts for the 2010-2011 academic year.

Obama's policies have encouraged these attacks on public schools. The administration and the Democratic-led Congress have refused to provide emergency funds to enable states and localities to close huge budget deficits resulting from rising unemployment and falling tax revenues, even as they handed over trillions in taxpayer dollars to bail out the banks.

The White House is seeking to exploit the fiscal crisis to push through its anti-public education agenda, tying whatever federal funds are on offer to attacks on teachers' jobs and pay, the closure of schools in working class communities, and the expansion of publicly subsidized but privately owned charter schools.

Speaking before an audience of business executives at the US Chamber of Commerce March 1, the president welcomed the mass firing of teachers at a public high school in Rhode Island. Obama insisted that the 74 teachers and 19 other school employees at Central Falls High School, a “failing school,” had to be held “accountable.”

As with Ronald Reagan's mass firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981, the White House endorsement of the Central Falls firings is a signal to state and local authorities across the country to demand that teachers accept lower pay, fewer benefits and longer hours, or face the loss of their jobs.

Teachers are being scape-goated for an education crisis for which they bear no responsibility. The media has fallen into line. The editorial in Thursday's *USA Today* was headlined, “Unions protect bad teachers, harming kids' education.” The cover story of the latest edition of *Newsweek* is entitled “Why We Must Fire Bad Teachers.”

Under Obama's “Race to the Top” program, states are being forced to compete for \$4.3 billion in federal stimulus funds. States that prohibit merit pay or the use of test scores in teacher evaluations are ineligible for funds. Those opening up more charter schools with new, lower-paid teachers will be rewarded.

Obama's budget for 2011 contains sweeping changes in funding

for primary and secondary education, radically altering the guidelines for the distribution of federal funds to schools with high concentrations of low-income students. A significant proportion of so-called Title I funds would be distributed to poorer districts—not on the basis of economic need, but according to their “performance.”

The unstated agenda behind these moves is nothing less than the dismantling of the public school system as it has been known in the US. It is to be replaced by a largely privatized system more directly based on social class and geared more closely to the profit interests of big business.

A Democratic administration that came to power by appealing—cynically and dishonestly—to popular hostility to war and the Bush administration’s pro-business policies, has become the vehicle for carrying out the type of radical assault on public education that had long been advocated by the Republican right.

Obama’s African-American background was utilized to mask his right-wing policies, lulling working class and young voters into believing he would be more sympathetic to their needs. In this mass deception, the liberal and phony “left” advocates of identity politics played a critical role.

The far-reaching and reactionary character of the administration’s education policy is summed up by the vocal support being given by the former Republican House Speaker, Newt Gingrich. A supporter of school privatization and long-time opponent of government social programs, Gingrich has been paired with Education Secretary Duncan and Al Sharpton to promote Obama’s “Race to the Top” program.

A broad consensus has emerged within the ruling elite in support of the drive to gut the public school system, with virtually the entire liberal Democratic Party establishment on board. This is driven, in part, by the financial crisis and the bankrupting of government at every level as a consequence of the bailout of Wall Street.

More fundamentally, it is the outcome three solid decades of social and political reaction, during which public education has been starved of funds and private charter and for-profit schools have been encouraged. The democratic and egalitarian conceptions historically associated with public education have become anathema to a ruling elite that presides over staggering and ever-growing levels of social inequality.

Corporate America has no interest in siphoning off a portion of its profits to pay for educating working class youth who will leave school to find only unskilled, low-paying jobs, or no jobs at all.

Obama’s major innovation in adopting the anti-education program previously associated with the Republican right is the enlistment of the support and participation of the teachers’ unions. He chose Duncan as his education secretary for precisely that purpose. As CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, Duncan made his name by getting the teachers’ union to sign onto his program of closing public schools and setting up new charter schools.

The unions have joined the assault on public education and their own rank-and-file members in return for assurances that the inflated salaries and perks of the union executives will be preserved.

The teachers’ unions have done, and will do, nothing to defend

teachers from layoffs, arbitrary firings and other attacks on their jobs and working conditions. Nor will they fight against school closures or defend the right of students to decent, quality education.

The drive to destroy public education must be stopped! The Socialist Equality Party proposes a united fight by teachers, students, parents and working people as a whole for the following demands:

- Stop all school closures and teacher layoffs. Rehire all laid-off teachers and staff!
- No charter schools. Reintegrate existing charter schools into a public education system democratically controlled by teachers, parents and the working population!
- Allocate trillions to rebuild the schools, hire new teachers, reduce class sizes and provide the most modern facilities to ensure quality education for all, from kindergarten through college!

Neither the Obama administration nor either of the two big business parties will carry out these demands. An independent mass political movement of working people must be built to fight for such a program.

This requires a new political strategy and perspective, based on a socialist program. The banks and major corporations must be nationalized under workers’ control to provide the resources to fund public education and other vital social programs. A radical restructuring of the tax system is required to redistribute the wealth from the top layers of society to the masses of working people.

The defense of education must be linked to the fight for health care, housing and other basic social needs. The colonial wars that are consuming hundreds of billions of dollars and costing the lives of millions of people in the Middle East and Central Asia must be ended, and all US and foreign troops removed from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Socialist Equality Party, its youth movement, the International Students for Social Equality, and the *World Socialist Web Site* are holding an Emergency Conference on the Social Crisis and War in Detroit on April 17 and 18 to discuss 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.

All those looking for the means to fight school closings and defend public education should make plans to attend. For further information and to register for the conference, click here.



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