

Obama applauds firing of Rhode Island teachers

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In a speech before the US Chamber of Commerce in Washington, DC on Monday President Obama hailed the decision by school authorities in Rhode Island to fire the entire teaching and support staff at Central Falls High School.

The mass firings ordered by state school officials were part of a national plan developed by the Obama administration to deal with so-called “failing schools.” Seventy-four teachers and 19 other school employees were dismissed after they rejected a “turnaround” plan—authored by Obama’s education secretary Arne Duncan—which would have torn up their contract and forced them to work longer hours without additional pay.

Obama made it clear the firings would be used as a model to impose his right-wing school agenda on teachers and other school employees throughout the country. This includes merit pay and other “performance-based” schemes, along with plans to shut down thousands of public schools and replace them with privately owned charter schools.

The president said the administration will target the 5,000 “lowest performing schools” in the nation for similar treatment. States would be instructed to identify high schools with graduation rates below 60 percent, he said, and the administration would use \$900 million in federal funding to compel districts to implement its strategies to improve graduation rates.

“Strategies like transforming schools from top to bottom by bringing in a new principal,” the president said, “and training teachers to use more effective techniques in the classroom. Strategies like closing a

school for a time and reopening it under new management, or even shutting it down entirely and sending its students to a better school. And strategies like replacing a school’s principal and at least half of its staff.”

If teachers and administrators continue to “fail” their students year after year, he said, and a school “doesn’t show signs of improvement, then there’s got to be a sense of accountability.”

“And that’s what happened in Rhode Island last week at a chronically troubled school, when just 7 percent of 11th graders passed state math tests—7 percent. When a school board wasn’t able to deliver change by other means, they voted to lay off the faculty and the staff. As my Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, says, our kids get only one chance at an education, and we need to get it right.”

The president deliberately made no reference to the fact that high rates of poverty are the surest indicators of low test score results, and that teachers in Central Falls—the poorest city in Rhode Island, like their counterparts in Detroit, Baltimore and other impoverished cities—are already going beyond the call of duty to help children while being forced to teach in overcrowded and chronically under-funded classrooms.

Obama’s education “reforms” have nothing to do with improving conditions for students. On the contrary, the president’s agenda is driven by the interests of the corporate and financial elite who are determined to slash school funding, while opening up the multi-billion dollar “education market” to private, for-profit companies.

Employing the same language the administration used when it demanded the spin-off or liquidation of “non-performing assets” at General Motors and Chrysler, Obama told the assembled businessmen at the US Chamber of Commerce that 12 percent of US schools were responsible for 50 percent of all dropouts. The teachers and administrators at these schools, like auto workers before them, would either have to accept draconian “turnaround” plans or lose their jobs.

Saying it was particularly appropriate to speak about education at a business forum, he made it clear that his agenda was entirely tailored to the interests of big business, which needed higher educational levels to “compete and win in the 21st century.” Moreover, he said, high dropout rates “cost our economy hundreds of billions of dollars” because high school dropouts were more likely to be teen parents, to commit crimes and rely on public assistance.

Obama began his remarks in Washington, DC by welcoming President Bush’s former education secretary Margaret Spellings—a champion of the hated No Child Left Behind policy—and praising her for leading “a lot of the improvement that’s been taking place and we’re building on.”

In fact, with the firing of teachers and use of federal funding to blackmail school districts into accepting an expansion of charter schools, the Democratic president is carrying out an attack on public education that the far right of the Republican Party has supported for decades but could never impose because of widespread popular opposition, including from teachers and other school employees.

The Obama administration has only been able to carry out this assault because of the undying support it enjoys from the trade union apparatus, including the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which has offered its services in support of the administration’s right-wing, pro-business education agenda.

In the face of the firing of the Central Falls teachers—an event some in the media have compared to Reagan’s firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers in

1981—AFT President Randi Weingarten made it clear that the union would do nothing to defend the teachers. In a public statement, she lamented the president’s “condoning” of the firings and appealed for the district to “reconsider” its action and work out a “reform plan through a mediator.”

Weingarten noted that the president of the local AFT affiliate in Central Falls had written a letter to the state school superintendent saying, “We fully support the Central Falls School District adoption of the transformation model for school improvement and encourage your communication of that fact to the Commissioner of Education.”

The AFT has repeatedly pledged its support for the White House’s reactionary school “reform” agenda, as long as it was implemented with the collaboration of the union executives. In a January 12 speech at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, Weingarten pointed to the role played by the AFT in imposing “accountability” schemes such as merit pay on teachers in Detroit and other cities.



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