

Obama continues assault on teachers

Jerry White
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Last week high school teachers in Central Falls, Rhode Island—who were fired en masse last February for defying concession demands—were forced to accept an agreement in return for their jobs that will increase the school day by 25 minutes, compel them to tutor an hour each week, gut seniority rights and submit to a new evaluation system that will facilitate their termination.

The firing of the 74 teachers and 19 other staff members—hailed by President Obama for imposing a “sense of accountability” on teachers—was a blatant act of intimidation. Its aim was to break the resistance of teachers nationally to an assault on their working conditions and living standards and pave the way for the further privatization of the public school system.

The sackings were carried out under guidelines drafted by US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who is targeting 5,000 “low-performing schools” across the country for similar treatment. In the name of “turning around” such schools, the administration has encouraged school boards to fire teachers or close schools and reopen them as privately run charter schools or under the management of for-profit contractors.

Rather than overturning Bush’s reactionary education policy—embodied in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—the Democratic president has spearheaded an assault on teachers and public education that his Republican predecessor could only have dreamed of.

At the center of this is the absurd claim that teachers are individually responsible for the problems caused by the chronic under-funding of the public schools and the academic challenges of young people facing poverty outside the classroom. In the case of Central Falls, nearly a third of the largely Hispanic population lives under the official poverty line and the former mill town is so economically distressed that it was put under receivership last week.

According to the administration’s twisted logic, education will be improved, not by increasing funding to the schools or addressing mass unemployment in the inner cities, but by firing teachers and destroying their working

conditions!

In his assault on public education, Obama is reviving the free-market nostrums of economist Milton Friedman, who first advocated subsidizing private and parochial schools to break up what he called the “socialist” monopoly of the public schools and teachers unions.

The promotion of school vouchers, merit pay and test-based teacher evaluations by the Republican right, however, was repeatedly rebuffed by the American people, who correctly saw this as an effort to undermine the egalitarian principles of public education and create a class-based education system.

It has now been left to a Democratic president to scapegoat teachers and accelerate the assault on public education. Like all of Obama’s policies—the bailout of the Wall Street banks, the attack on auto workers, the health care overhaul and coming attacks on entitlements—school “reform” is aimed at drastically reducing costs for the financial elite. At the same time, the school system is being tailored ever more closely to the interests of big business, including multibillionaires like Bill Gates whose private foundations have funded the expansion of charter schools.

An article in Sunday’s *New York Times* magazine, entitled “The Teachers’ Unions’ Last Stand,” grumbles about the cost of public school teachers versus their charter school counterparts. Describing a school building in upper Manhattan, which is shared by Public School 149 and a charter school, the Harlem Success Academy, author Stephen Brill bitterly complains, “Instead of matching pension contributions paid to charter teachers that cost the school \$193 per student … the union contract provides a pension plan that is now costing the city \$2,605 per year per pupil.” He continues, “The best estimate is that it costs at least \$19,358 per year to educate each student on the public side of the building, or \$980 more than on the charter side.”

It is well known that charters, which are run privately but funded publicly, have an incentive to drastically reduce costs in order to increase the profit for their

investors. This has led to gross corruption and falsification of test scores. Meanwhile, they regularly exclude students with learning difficulties, foreign language speakers and the poorest students who require greater resources.

The Obama administration is also seeking to fundamentally change the formula for distributing so-called Title I federal funding for public school districts, from one based on the number of low-income students they teach, to one based on how many “reforms” the districts carry out.

As a first step it is inducing cash-starved school boards to gut the living standards and working conditions of teachers in order to qualify for a share of its \$4.35 billion Race to the Top fund. The above-mentioned article notes the criteria districts must meet:

“The highest number of points—138 of the 500-point scale that Duncan and his staff created for the Race—would be awarded,” Brill wrote, on a commitment to eliminate “seniority-based compensation and permanent job security.” He continued, “To win the contest, the states had to present new laws, contracts and data systems making teachers individually responsible for what their students achieve, and demonstrating, for example, that budget-forced teacher layoffs will be based on the quality of the teacher, not simply based on seniority.”

Last month the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) union agreed to the elimination of “tenure-based job security” in Washington DC, clearing the way for the district to fire so-called “ineffective” teachers in the nation’s capital, which was hit with millions in budget cuts last year. This is only one of many examples nationally of the unions imposing merit pay and other punitive “accountability” measures on their members to help states qualify for federal funds.

Whereas his Republican predecessors often clashed with the teachers unions, Obama has received the full support for the AFT and the National Education Association, which have promoted him as a “partner” in the White House. Having collaborated in the destruction of tens of thousands of teachers’ jobs, the AFT and NEA have concluded that the best way to defend the privileges of the union officialdom is by collaborating with the administration to impose its reactionary “reform” agenda.

The entire corporate and political establishment—from the Democrats and Republicans, to the news media and trade unions—is united in the claim that there is “no money” for public education, even as trillions are handed

over to the Wall Street banks and squandered on overseas wars.

That is because public education—like every other basic democratic right—is incompatible with an economic and political system that serves, not the interests of society as a whole, but the insatiable demands of the financial aristocracy. America’s ruling elite and their bought-and-paid-for representatives in both big business parties consider expenditures for public education to be an unnecessary and unacceptable drain on their wealth, particularly since capitalism is condemning the majority of working class youth to a future of permanent unemployment, low-paying jobs and militarism.

The struggle to defend and vastly improve public education is above all a political struggle over the allocation of society’s resources. Trillions of dollars must be poured into the hiring and training of teachers—guaranteeing them a secure and decent standard of living—and the building of new schools and equipping them with state-of-the-art learning tools. Moreover, the miserable social conditions students face outside the classroom must be addressed through a massive public works program to hire the unemployed and put an end to poverty.

This requires the development of a mass political movement of the working class, independent of and opposed to the two corporate-backed parties of big business and dedicated to the socialist transformation of society.

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