The political struggle to defend public education

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The massive cuts to education taking place in Michigan are part of a nationwide assault on the public schools spearheaded by the Democratic Party and the Obama administration. In state after state teachers and other school employees are being laid off and seeing their wages and benefits cut. Schools are being shuttered, programs slashed, class sizes increased, and essential services privatized. In Michigan, school employees have been forced to take more than a billion dollars in wage and benefit concessions.

Under the leadership of US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and with the full backing of Democratic leaders at the state and national level, the basic infrastructure needed to educate youth is being dismantled. Having emptied the federal treasury through the bank bailout and the funding of two criminal wars, Washington claims there is no money for education or any other social needs.

At the same time, educators are blamed for the deplorable conditions developing in the schools. Earlier this year, President Obama applauded the wholesale firing of teachers in Central Falls, Rhode Island, insisting that this action was an example of what needed to be done in "failing schools" throughout the country.

The White House's education policy, embodied in the Race to the Top legislation, is a continuation of the reactionary No Child Left Behind law promoted by former President George W. Bush—charter schools, merit pay, standardized testing. In Michigan, Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm, in alliance with other leading figures in her party, is playing the central role in rolling back teachers' health care and retirement benefits.

In Detroit, Robert Bobb, the emergency financial manager appointed by Governor Granholm, is shutting scores of schools while handing over dozens to privately owned, and publicly funded charter companies, which enjoy the backing of wealthy and totally unaccountable corporate interests, such as the Skillman and Kellogg foundations.

Millions are outraged in Michigan, across the country, and even internationally, at the assault on public education. The protests occurring today in Lansing are part of this growing sentiment. However, hostility towards the policies of the government is not enough. The question remains as to what political program must guide the struggle in defense of public education.

The MEA, the major sponsor of today's event, and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), insist that working people must appeal to the very same big business politicians carrying out these attacks. According to the MEA's web site, today's demonstration has been called to organize "[m]eetings with legislators" and "cyber-lobbying and postcard writing to convince lawmakers to take real, balanced steps to end our decade-long budget crisis."

At today's rally, the union will claim that it has "alternative" solutions to the budget crisis in Michigan. The MEA advocates the institution of an additional sales tax on certain goods to secure greater funds for public education. These are regressive taxes that disproportionately fall on working people and the poor. If implemented, they would add a further burden to Michigan's already cash-strapped families.

The MEA further insists that audits of school spending and efforts to eliminate waste will yield significant funds for education. This is not only false, it is a diversion from the real source of the budget crisis. Michigan's public education system is in need of tens of billions of dollars worth of investments. Since 2000, per pupil spending has fallen by 17.8 percent. Whatever mismanagement currently exists in the use of state funds pales in comparison to the massive amount of money that has been taken out of the school system by successive administrations in Lansing and Washington—Democratic and Republican.

The MEA is also calling for the implementation of a progressive income-tax structure. This demand is completely hollow. The MEA and the other unions in the state who also endorse this measure know full well that the Democrats and Republicans are adamantly opposed to a progressive income tax, having handed over billions in tax breaks and other concessions to make the state "business friendly."

This proposal is designed to give the illusion that some

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segment of the political establishment can be made to reverse course. The union further seeks to cover up the fact that for decades it has been collaborating with and promoting the very politicians attacking public education.

The MEA and AFT endorsed Granholm and Obama's candidacies, insisting that the victory of Democratic Party politicians would be a win for public education. Now, they are working to carry out their policies. The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), for example, is working hand-in-hand with the school district to gut employee pay and close schools.

After years of imposing concessions contracts on its membership, the MEA is now primarily concerned with making sure that it is consulted when the state determines exactly how to cut the education budget. The union has repeatedly stated that it accepts the necessity of "reforms"—i.e. attacks on teachers and public education—but wants its voice to be heard in the process of working them out.

Speaking to the State Board of Education in the aftermath of the passage of legislation that made the state eligible to compete in Race to the Top, MEA President Iris K. Salters explained that her union's opposition was not based on the foul character of the law, but on the fact that it had not had a chance to see the final version before being asked to sign off on it. In Salter's comments, she made sure to include an endorsement of Obama's right-wing education policy.

"Make no mistake, the Michigan Education Association understands the need for reforms," she said, adding further on, "President Obama was crystal clear—Race to the Top was supposed to be about collaboration—bringing together the educational community to what's best for our children. But Michigan's application was the furthest thing possible from collaboration or a sense of professional community or respect."

The MEA and AFT, just like the United Auto Workers, want to make sure that the income and perks of the trade union apparatus will remain, even as membership rolls plummet through layoffs and retirements. They collaborate with Obama and Duncan at the national level, and Granholm at the state level, in order to prove their usefulness to the political establishment in imposing austerity measures and corralling popular discontent.

Aware of the popular anger developing over the assault on public education, the MEA's "Enough is Enough" campaign is designed to give teachers a chance to let off steam. The union's aim is to keep rising discontent over conditions in the schools within the safe confines of official politics.

A genuine struggle is not possible through the trade unions. Teachers, administrators, and all those who work in the schools must form independent rank-and-file committees to oppose the policies of Granholm, Obama, and the entire political establishment. However, this is only the beginning of the fight.

The defense of public education cannot be secured through a labor agreement. The struggle to defend and vastly improve schooling is a *political* fight over the allocation of society's resources and which *class* sets priorities. Over the past thirty years, both big business parties have engaged in an unprecedented redistribution of wealth into the pockets of the financial aristocracy, while conducting an unrelenting assault on the jobs and living standards of the working class. Having condemned millions of young people to a future of unemployment or low-paying jobs, the financial elite sees no need to pay for public education.

What is necessary, above all, is a new political movement that unifies all sections of the working class in a common political struggle, directed at the source of the crisis: the capitalist system and the two political parties—the Democrats and Republicans—that defend it.

The right to a high-quality education, from pre-school through graduate school, is a basic right that must be guaranteed to everyone. There must be an immediate end to all layoffs and resources must be devoted to hiring teachers with the aim of sharply reducing class sizes. Teachers' salaries must be raised and all benefits restored. The privatization of services in the schools—bussing, cafeteria work, janitorial duties—must be ended and reversed. The testing mania promoted by Race to the Top must be replaced with a serious effort to cultivate the minds and talents of youth.

Such demands cannot be met under a social and economic system in which the right of big business to make profit is placed above human needs. The defense of public education is only possible on the basis of a struggle for socialism, including the transformation of the major industries and the Wall Street banks into public enterprises, collectively owned and democratically controlled by the working people.

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