

New York public schools under siege

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18 June 2010

New York City's billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg recently reinstated his threat to lay off 4,400 teachers if Congress fails to rescind a \$600 million cut in federal aid to the city. The layoffs would ax approximately 7 percent of the teaching staff in this, the largest school district in the country.

Bloomberg had previously stated that instead of layoffs he was willing to freeze teachers' wages for two years. Now, in the face of reduced federal funding, he apparently is prepared to both cut jobs and freeze wages. The failure of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) to fight for a new contract since the last one expired October 31 has already left teachers with no wage increase for two years.

Bloomberg's Chancellor of schools, Joel Klein, still plans to spend \$5 million for the New Teacher project to recruit teachers during a hiring freeze and with possible layoffs. He also added a half million dollars to the Department of Education (DOE) management payroll, with central staff having increased at the DOE by 30 percent from 2001 to 2010, to 2,267.

The attack on teachers' jobs and wages is part of a multi-sided assault on public education that is being carried out in New York City and New York State as a whole, with the full collaboration of the Democratic Party and the teachers' union.

New York City's United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) recently came to an agreement with the State Education Department (SED) that will allow the evaluation of public school teachers to be based heavily on the test scores of their students. This agreement, along with acquiescence on the expansion of charter schools, is part of the union bureaucracy's support for New York State's application for \$700 million in the second wave of competition for the Obama administration's "Race to the Top" funds.

The administration has demanded that in order to qualify for such funding states must remove limits on the number of privately managed charter schools they allow and use student test scores to evaluate teachers. Although these funds cannot solve the state budget crisis, the unions

are willing to sacrifice the protections won for workers in the past.

Under current work rules, teachers can be dismissed during a three-year probationary period based on lesson observations by supervisors that evaluate them as satisfactory or unsatisfactory. After this period, tenure status protects teachers from arbitrary, personal and political firing by requiring formal charges for incompetence or serious misconduct and a hearing before an arbitrator.

Under the new agreement, 40 percent of teacher evaluation will be based on students' annual progress test scores. Teachers have objected to the security of their jobs being based on such measurements because they cannot choose the student population they teach. Students from impoverished areas with a variety of special needs—those who are, for example, deficient in basic skills, who are new English language learners or have learning disabilities or are homeless—are at a disadvantage compared to students in higher income communities that have access to more resources.

Students from academically disadvantaged backgrounds will be likely to score in a range that would penalize their teachers. The current assault on education in the form of layoffs, the slashing of school programs, and increasing class size will further hinder the ability of already underfunded schools to aid these students.

Already in January 2007, Schools Chancellor Joel Klein announced his intention to use student test scores as part of the decision to grant tenure. Experienced teachers, who may earn as much as two new teachers, have become targeted as a financial liability as the city seeks to slash spending. In 2008, the UFT was forced to sue the city for age discrimination on behalf of 700 teachers whose positions were eliminated and could not find new permanent positions. The number of teachers suspended from classrooms on charges of alleged incompetence also

rose.

In July 2009, the union's newspaper stated, "The UFT believes that in its current state, value-added scores have no place in evaluations and we supported the state law that prohibits their use for awarding tenure."

The UFT denies that the new agreement would put teachers of high-needs students at a disadvantage in their evaluations.

The UFT has also pitted younger teachers against older teachers by a campaign to keep "the best" teachers, even though studies show that it takes years for teachers to reach the peak of their skills.

The union-sanctioned turn in teacher evaluation comes at a time when the New York City public school system will make some of its deepest budget cuts ever.

New York State has a \$9.2 billion deficit in its \$136 billion budget. This deficit includes \$1 billion in contributions to local schools. Since local districts do not yet know how much state aid they will receive, they are forced to cut programs and are preparing to eliminate up to 15,000 jobs statewide. Proposed cuts of \$327 million to mental health and social services will impact the neediest students and their families.

While the use of testing to attack the legal job protections of teacher tenure and seniority will have a direct effect on teachers in public schools, the budget cuts are also being used as an excuse to extend the market-oriented schemes that will compel teachers to work more for less. In order to qualify for \$700 million in federal Race to the Top funds, the New York State legislature raised the cap on the number of charter schools from 200 to 460, and from 100 to 214 in New York City.

The UFT itself defends the principle of privatization inherent in privately run charter schools and set up three of its own charter schools. With nearly 10 percent of New York's schools now charters, a critical mass has been achieved that would make it difficult to reverse the trend.

While some charters are able to achieve higher test score results due to selective student admissions, studies have shown that most do no better, and may do worse, than traditional public schools. Nevertheless, there has

been growing investment by wealthy hedge-fund managers in charter schools, often described as "philanthropy." The unstated intention is to create a small layer of "achieving" schools for the needs of business while allowing the majority of public schools to become holding pens for youth fated to join a vast pool of low-wage workers and the unemployed.

While New York State's new legislation prevents charters being run for profit, many non-profit organizations have been set up to siphon off funds or act as tax havens for parent profit-making corporations. Charter schools often pay large salaries to their upper middle-class executives. Former New York City Council member Eva Moskowitz, for example, earns \$316,570 a year from her position as CEO of the Success Charter Network, according to the *Daily News*.

New York City real estate is expensive, and selling bonds to raise building funds is restricted for charters. As a result, Chancellor Klein has enraged many public school parents with his policy of locating better equipped charters inside already overcrowded public school buildings.

Recently JPMorgan Chase took out full-page newspaper advertisements to announce that it is dedicating \$325 million to supporting charter school facility needs. In an article in *Education Week*, Alex Molnar, a professor of education policy at Arizona State University, explained that JPMorgan will make money from a government tax credit program established at the end of the Clinton administration.



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