

Los Angeles Times campaigns against teachers

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On Sunday, the *Los Angeles Times* published an analysis of the “effectiveness” of city teachers, ostensibly based on student test scores, as part of an intensifying campaign to blame teachers for deteriorating conditions in the public schools. The newspaper is one of the first media outlets in the nation to publish this information, raising serious concerns about the privacy of teachers under the new testing regime.

For its report, the *LA Times* analyzed data that had been gathered by the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest district in the country. Later this month, The *LA Times* will make public the entire data set, which contains information on over 6,000 Los Angeles teachers.

In an interview on Monday, US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan provocatively endorsed the publication of test scores not just in Los Angeles, but on a national scale. Duncan asked, “What’s there to hide?” Duncan’s endorsement of the *LA Times* report indicates a further rightward step in the Obama administration’s education policy.

Through the funding restrictions of the “Race to the Top” program, which mirror the infamous “No Child Left Behind” policies of George W. Bush, the Obama administration has pressured school districts throughout the country to adopt a so-called “value-added” approach to evaluating teachers. Under this method, the performance of students on standardized tests is tracked year after year, ostensibly to isolate the impact that individual teachers have had on the student’s development. The broader aim of this is to directly link the hiring and firing of teachers, as well as pay, to these test scores.

The *LA Times* editorial board used the data on student test scores to draw the most hostile conclusions

regarding teachers. In a separate article, the editors indicated that the report shows that “schools are irresponsibly failing their students by placing them with ineffective teachers, and continuing to pay those teachers as though they contributed equally.”

The comments of the editors reveal the true motive for the publication of this material. The paper is consciously aiding the Obama administration in its attempt to scapegoat teachers for the failing US education system, as well as to cut the salaries of teachers by introducing a “merit-based” pay structure.

The use of standardized tests to measure and develop the effectiveness of teachers has dubious scientific merit. Standardized tests, according to most teachers and many experts, do not measure the full range of learning that takes place in a classroom. Instead, the tests encourage teachers to “teach to the test.” In other words, teachers receive higher scores via their students when the curriculum is limited to include only the material that appears on the test.

The standardized tests focus on an extremely narrow range of skills in the areas of math, vocabulary and reading comprehension. Other disciplines and important skills, such as critical thinking, creativity and artistic ability, are entirely ignored. Thus, teachers who attempt to cultivate their students in these areas and expand their knowledge outside of the subjects included on the standardized tests face punitive measures as a result.

California Secretary of Education Ronnie Reiss says that the state will encourage all its districts to move to a “value-added” method for evaluating teachers. “Publishing this data is not about demonizing teachers,” said Reiss. “It’s going to create a more market-driven approach to results.” Similar demands for a “market-driven” or “business” approach to the

administration of schools can be heard across the country.

The statements of Reiss reflect the overall strategy of policymakers in Sacramento, which is to balance California's recurring budget shortfalls by cutting money for education, particularly by reducing income for teachers. In April of this year, LAUSD brought back a contract cutting five teaching days from the current school year and seven from the coming year. Teachers are being furloughed in districts throughout the state, as state politicians repeatedly claim there is no money for education.

According to the *LA Times*, "The comments from Reiss, appointed by a Republican governor, and Duncan, appointed by a Democratic president, show how the use of data for teacher accountability has become a bipartisan issue." In reality, it shows that both parties of big business are the enemies of educators and students, and deeply hostile to the existence of an educated and knowledgeable public.

Teachers have been overwhelmingly hostile to this new round of attempts to blame them for the problems with public education. In response to the outcry, the California Teachers Association has condemned the *LA Times* and called for a boycott. "Publishing the database ... is irresponsible and disrespectful to the hard-working teachers of Los Angeles," said David Sanchez, president of the organization.

The call for a boycott of the newspaper is little more than political posturing that the union knows will have no effect. Despite parading around as defenders of education, the unions are ardent supporters of the Democratic Party and celebrated the coming to power of the Obama administration as a great boon to working people. They are directly responsible for the attacks the White House, and all other sections of the party at the state and local level, are carrying out against teachers.

As California's public education system has been under assault by successive administrations, the unions have worked hand-in-hand with the government to ensure that teachers accept concessions contracts. The UTLA, the Los Angeles teachers union, supported the most recent agreement offered by the city, which imposed furloughs on its members. It has benefited from the semi-privatization of the Los Angeles school system, which saw the transfer of 22 out of 30 schools to the UTLA for administration as part of a broad

restructuring initiative earlier this year.

California teachers cannot rely on the unions to defend them against the assault on public education being carried out by the political establishment with the aid of the media. They must establish independent rank-and-file organizations that seek to form a common alliance with educators and students in other parts of the country and that appeal to the working class as a whole for support. A broad campaign in defense of public education must thoroughly reject the claim that there is no money for social needs, and that everything must be subordinated to the "market principle," i.e., the profit interests of big business and the rich.



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