

Detroit teachers hear lecture by “school reform” opponent

Shannon Jones
28 September 2010

Diane Ravitch, a critic of President Obama’s Race to the Top program and the movement for so-called school reform, spoke at a forum sponsored by Wayne State University September 23 in Detroit. She is currently on a nationwide speaking tour to promote her bestselling book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*.

Several hundred people attended the Wayne State event, including large numbers of active and retired teachers. The turnout expressed the anger and disquiet among wide layers of the population over the assault on public education in Detroit, which is being carried out with the support and encouragement of the Obama administration.

Last year Education Secretary Arne Duncan declared Detroit “ground zero” for the Obama administration’s rightwing school reform agenda. In March 2009 Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, with the support of the Obama administration, appointed former Washington, DC, deputy mayor and city administrator Robert Bobb as emergency financial administrator over the Detroit Public Schools. Since then Bobb has closed 60 schools, imposed teacher pay cuts and is working with wealthy philanthropic organizations to transform public schools into privately run charter schools.

These attacks have been carried out with the support of the Detroit Federation of Teachers and Michigan Federation of Teachers. MFT President David Hecker and Bobb both attended the lecture, Hecker greeting the financial “czar” with a demonstrative public handshake.

While Ravitch’s exposures of the reactionary content of “school reform” have tapped into growing social anger, she offers no viable perspective for the defense of education. In fact Ravitch is closely allied with the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association, which have collaborated with Obama under the slogan “school reform, with us, not against us.” For their part the teachers’ unions have promoted Ravitch to provide a cover for their own betrayals.

In her lecture Ravitch reviewed the main themes in her

book, which presents a review of the bipartisan attack on education that has been carried out over the past several decades, starting with the Reagan administration and continued under Clinton, Bush and Obama. Ravitch’s perspective is informed by the fact that she was for two decades a prominent supporter of “merit pay,” “school choice,” “teacher accountability” and other market-based policies, which she now criticizes.

She served as US assistant secretary of education from 1991-1993 under the administration of Bush senior. Later, President Clinton appointed her to the National Assessment Governing Board. She has also worked for rightwing think tanks promoting free-market solutions for education.

In the recent period she changed her mind about the extension of market principles to education, concluding that using the business model as the basis for education is at odds with the democratic and egalitarian concept of public education as a right available to all. In her remarks at Wayne State she called public education “a precious and important democratic institution.” She continued, “In the past, critics of public education wanted more teachers, more funding.” Under the present policies she warned, it was not clear if public education would survive. “Will there be a public education system bound by law to enroll all children, or will they have to wait for a lottery to see if they got in? We are on our way back to the 19th Century, when every family was on its own.”

Ravitch and the unions she is associated with no doubt hoped the election of Obama signaled an easing of the assault on education. Instead, Obama expanded the attacks carried out under the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind policy. This apparently led to her decision in early 2009 to openly oppose the Obama administration’s education policies.

She said she had attempted to approach the Obama administration about its education policies, but was rebuffed. “Leading Democrats are continuing to defend No child Left Behind,” Ravitch said. “They are delegitimizing public education to set the ground for private education.”

Obama's Race to the Top program, Ravitch said, was "bribing states to do the wrong thing." She characterized current education policies as "The Donald Trump school of education management."

Ravitch defended teachers against the claim that pensions, decent wages, benefits and seniority were obstacles to reform. The advocates of reform included wealthy corporate interests including hedge funds, Ravitch continued, asking rhetorically, "[W]ho provides more social value, teachers or hedge fund managers? It is not even close."

She rebutted the claims that poor teaching, not social conditions, were at the root of low student achievement. "Poverty affects achievement," she said. "Stop blaming schools for the ravages of poverty and homelessness."

Ravitch remarked on her relationship with and admiration for Albert Shanker, former President of the American Federation of Teachers and a leading Cold War anti-communist trade union official. She maintains a close connection with current AFT President Randi Weingarten and claims the unions are carrying out a defense of teachers even as they collaborate with the Obama administration to destroy public education.

This was underscored by Weingarten's September 26 appearance on *Meet the Press* alongside Robert Bobb, Michelle Rhee chancellor of the Washington schools, who recently carried out the mass firings of teachers, and Education Secretary Duncan. Weingarten did not raise any objections to the Obama's education policies, pointing out that the AFT was modifying teacher contracts along the lines being demanded by Obama and Duncan. She repeated the rightwing claim that the teacher seniority system was broken, pledging to help make it easier for school districts to fire teachers.

Those in the audience greeted Ravitch's scathing criticism of the education reform movement with close attention, interrupting on several occasions with enthusiastic applause.

In the question period, a Detroit teacher, who identified himself as a supporter of the *World Socialist Web Site*, called attention to the fact the policies that Ravitch opposes, merit pay, charter schools, punitive measures against teachers, were being carried out in Detroit by Robert Bobb with the support of the teacher unions.

Ravitch did not directly reply to the thrust of the comment, that the teacher unions were supporting the Obama administration's attack on teachers. Instead she lamely pointed to other districts, such as San Diego, where she claimed the unions and school administration were partnering together productively.

Another WSWS supporter noted that while Ravitch raised important criticisms of present policies, she did not provide an explanation of why all sections of the political

establishment were lined up behind the assault being carried out on public education. Ravitch said, "[T]he power of money" was behind this bi-partisan assault, adding, however, that she had no idea why "Obama has gone for this."

In response to a question from another teacher asking for direction on the way forward all Ravitch could suggest was the hope that "some elected official would stand up and say this is wrong."

Ravitch's search for a politician who will defend public education is in vain. The embrace by the Democrats of the anti-teacher and anti-public education nostrums long associated with the extreme right is the product of the historical decline of American capitalism and the explosion of social inequality. There is no longer any constituency in the ruling elite for the defense of public education or genuine democratic rights, particularly under conditions in which the masses of working people are being forced to pay for the worst economic crisis since the 1930s.

As an acknowledged defender of the capitalist market, Ravitch is unable to propose any viable alternative to systematic dismantling of public education being carried out by both big business parties.

Following Ravitch's lecture a number of teachers came up to express their agreement with the remarks of the WSWS supporters. One Detroit teacher told the WSWS, "Thank you; you called out Robert Bobb. They're attacking public education. It's the business model. It's dollars and cents. We are not dollars and cents. The business model didn't even work for business. Look at businesses now."

A retired Detroit teacher added, "They manipulate us like numbers. It is Obama doing it. Bush would have had a much rougher road. He is killing us."

Greg, a teacher at Cody High School in Detroit said, "Something like four new teachers out of college have been hired in the whole state of Michigan, and you had all these teachers retire. Everyone thought it was so good we elected the first black president. I don't think we even have a union anymore."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact