

Education conference in Denver: A conspiracy against teachers and the public schools

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28 February 2011

Two weeks ago, as tens of thousands of Wisconsin teachers, students and state workers began a struggle against the attacks on their wages, benefits and democratic rights by right-wing Governor Scott Walker, a conference of a different nature was convening in Denver, Colorado.

Funded by the Ford Foundation and held under the auspices of the Obama administration, the February 15-16 conference, entitled Advancing Student Achievement Through Labor-Management Collaboration, brought together representatives from 150 school districts. The conference's stated aim was "to highlight a collaborative approach between school administrators and union members to expedite progress in developing education reforms and better results for students."

In actuality, the conference revealed the line-up of forces that are seeking to impose the Obama administration's reactionary "Race to the Top" education agenda on teachers and school employees. Obama's proposals continue and deepen the measures contained in the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind legislation, including the use of standardized testing and a host of punitive measures, as well as charter schools, as a means toward the privatization of public education. The major teachers' unions are completely on board, alongside the Obama administration, in prosecuting these attacks.

Along with the Denver event's principal organizer, Education Secretary Arne Duncan, conference attendees included Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers, Dennis Van Roekel, President of the National Education Association; various charter school advocates, including Marco Petruzzi, President and CEO of Green Dot Public Schools; and representatives of the Bill and Melinda Gates and Eli and Edythe Broad Foundations. The Gates and Broad Foundations reflect the growing consensus within ruling class circles in the US for an education "reform" agenda that is aimed against teachers

and against public education as a whole.

Education Secretary Duncan opened the conference and set the tone, stating: "It is not a new idea to say that educators must put the interests of children first. But that idea is often dismissed as a truism or empty rhetoric. I disagree. Many district policies that perpetuate the status quo today are grounded in what's good for management or good for labor. Yet not all policies that are fair to adults are good for children. And sometimes what is good for children is not fair to adults."

It is no accident that Duncan's phrase "children first" closely resembles "StudentsFirst," the name adopted by the newly formed lobbying outfit headed by former Washington D.C. schools chancellor Michelle Rhee. (See "Ex-Washington DC schools chief escalates campaign against public education," WSWs 26 January 2011) Although Duncan's tactical course differs in some respects from that of Rhee, both of them seek to pit the interests of students against those of teachers, thus diverting attention from the fact that the Obama administration and the entire political establishment cater to the needs of the corporate and financial aristocracy, in opposition to students, teachers and every other section of the working class.

The Education Secretary spelled out the differences between Obama and other sections of the Democratic Party, on the one hand, and Republican Governors like Walker in Wisconsin and Pawlenty in Minnesota, for example. While the Republicans seek to dispense with the services of the unions, Obama would like to enlist the support of the union bureaucracy in carrying out its reactionary attacks on teachers and education as a whole.

As Duncan put it, "President Obama and I are convinced that labor and management can collaborate to solve many of our nation's enduring educational challenges. And we believe that progress more often follows tough-minded collaboration than tough-minded confrontation."

The differences between Duncan and the Republicans are

entirely tactical. The end results will be similar—merit pay systems, the elimination of tenure, growing class sizes and other cutbacks. At the same time, as Duncan put it, “Teachers and their leaders need to be at the table when districts are making major decisions and pursuing new reforms.”

The message is clear. The unions will collaborate with the Obama administration in pushing through a host of education “reforms” that threaten teachers’ job security and working conditions, as well as their wages and benefits. In exchange, the Obama administration will uphold the unions’ collective bargaining “rights,” their ability to continue to collect dues, while policing the rank-and-file so that the administration’s agenda can be implemented with a minimum of disruption.

For teachers the maintenance of collective bargaining is a means to an end of defending their right to strike and their jobs, wages and conditions. For Duncan and the unions, however, it means continuing and deepening the stranglehold used to prevent the independent struggle of the teachers, so that unending concessions can be imposed. This means the destruction of the public schools as effective means of educating the young generation.

Duncan repeatedly spoke of the “new normal,” the cynical assumption that these are “leaner” times, and that there truly is no money for education, or for the maintenance of teachers’ wages and benefits. In the same manner as his boss, President Obama, who in his recent State of the Union address made no reference to the spread of poverty and want in America, Duncan brushes aside the real class divide, in which the top one percent of the population in the US controls 40 percent of the wealth, or the fact that the Obama administration voted to extend tax cuts for the wealthy.

The participation of both major teachers unions in the Denver conference was further evidence of what has already become well known. They serve as the junior partners of the Obama administration and the ruling elite as a whole. They are offering their services in forcing teachers and all working people to pay for the crisis of the profit system.

This was particularly evident in the remarks of AFT President Randi Weingarten in Denver. Sounding more like a corporate or government official than a supposed leader of teachers, Weingarten, endorsing Duncan’s demand for changes in hiring practices and work rules, declared; “With Recovery Act funds drying up, this is a front burner issue across the country. My view is that we need to look hard at the impact of staffing rules and policies on students, especially in low achieving schools. This means recruiting the best teachers and then making sure that our state laws, labor contracts and personnel practices support these teachers and keep them in their schools. Clearly, the status

quo is not working for children.”

Of course the status quo is not working, especially as many tens of thousands of teachers face layoffs and school systems cut programs to the bone in the face of record local and state budget deficits. This is not what Weingarten means by the status quo. Instead she pledges support to the agenda of the billionaire “philanthropists” like Gates and Broad. She will support the imposition of fundamental changes in hiring practices, work rules and compensation that will adversely affect teachers and students.

The essential role in the attacks on public education played by union officials such as Weingarten, Van Roekel and others makes clear the need for teachers and other public employees to break with the trade unions and their acceptance of the dictates of big business, and build new organizations of struggle. These new organizations are needed to democratically represent the needs and interests of teachers, at the same time reaching out to every other section of the working class and organizing a broad campaign in defense of public education.

In opposition to the draconian cutbacks endorsed by all Democratic and Republican politicians and their union supporters, teachers and other workers must demand that billions of dollars be spent to hire tens of thousands of new teachers, build new schools, reduce class sizes and make the latest equipment and technology available to every student. This will require the fight for a socialist program and for a workers government that will implement it. The only way forward for teachers and all public employees is through a complete break with both big business parties, and the building of a new party of the working class dedicated to the socialist reorganization of economic life.



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