

New York City closes 22 more public schools

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In two contentious public meetings at Brooklyn Technical High School this month, the New York Department of Education's (DOE) Panel for Educational Policy (PEP), eight of whose 15 members are appointed by billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg, voted to close 22 public schools, including Jamaica High School in Queens, Kennedy High School in the Bronx and Paul Robeson HS in Brooklyn.

Over 2,000 parents, teachers and students showed up at each of the meetings, on February 1 and 3, to protest the school closings. With proceedings scheduled to begin at 8 p.m., many began lining up to speak as early as 3:00 in the afternoon. Over 350 signed up to speak at the first meeting. The audience was furious at the lack of any real power in the process for the families and teachers associated with these schools. Local media reports noted one man calling the proceedings "a puppet show" and chants of "Fraud, fraud" from the audience after the PEP voted to close the schools.

At the second meeting nearly half of the audience, many of whom have been opposing the threatened closings of their schools for more than a year, walked out in protest against the undemocratic nature of the proceedings.

On both occasions the audience met the panel with derision and chants. Schools Chancellor Cathleen Black, the multimillionaire publishing executive whom Mayor Michael Bloomberg had appointed over strong objections from education professionals for her lack of experience, was an object of particular scorn. Students chanted, "Black is wack," using hip-hop slang for lame or insane.

In a typically arrogant reproach to the participants, Bloomberg told the radio station WOR-AM, "This is not democracy, letting people yell and scream. That's not freedom of expression—that's just trying to take away somebody else's rights." Later, he slandered the teachers who attended, claiming that "people who

provide the service poorly don't want to lose their jobs. That's what they care about. They don't care about the kids."

Last year, the panel voted to close 19 schools, but a judge later issued an injunction against the city, in a suit filed by the teachers union, that temporarily halted the closings.

The panel also voted to allow privately run charter schools to share space with public schools in buildings owned by the city. At least seven charter schools will replace the schools that were closed.

The 22 schools have been labeled as failing by the state and as such are subject to closure. Their students graduate in smaller numbers than others within five years, and the schools receive poor letter grades from the city, based largely on high-stakes test scores that have been shown to be inaccurate and misleading.

All of these schools have seen their budgets cut and most have high proportions of students who are English language learners or have other special needs.

Most of the schools will be replaced with smaller schools with more selective admissions standards, though eight of the schools closed this month were themselves smaller schools sponsored by the city, highlighting the fact that smaller schools (as well as charters) often do not perform better than others.

The real value of shutting schools, for the tiny elite of multimillionaires and billionaires that controls the economic and political life of the city, lies in advancing the goal of the privatization of education and fomenting divisions in the working class itself.

Tens of thousands of children of non-English speaking immigrants and special needs students will find no place in the public school system. Others will be shunted to other failing schools where overcrowding will increase. In their own school buildings these students often encounter students at smaller or charter schools that are better funded and equipped.

There is widespread opposition to the school closings among ordinary people in New York City, and not only among those parents, teachers and students who are directly affected. A plan has been put into effect by the mayor and his coterie of well-paid advisors and political appointees, including the wealthy and unqualified Cathleen Black, that impacts the lives of millions who have absolutely no say in the process.

Not only must parents, teachers and students bear the consequences of increasing social inequality in education, accentuated by massive budget cuts foisted on working people still dealing with mass unemployment and wage-cutting. They are also forced to put up with farcically undemocratic procedures at the PEP meetings. Only a desperate hope of saving their schools, as well as the determination to make their voices heard, impelled them to come at all.

It is at these functions that representatives of the Democratic Party and the trade unions (who are allowed to speak before others) assemble to push illusions and diversions in the guise of anger and opposition. At the February 1 PEP meeting, City Councilman Charles Barron, a Black Panther in his youth and a long-time Democrat, chided Cathleen Black for her inexperience, but could only propose that the audience would “scream all night.” Earlier in the week he had staged an impotent protest in front of the Department of Education’s headquarters in Manhattan.

Barron poses as a crusader against injustice, but he specializes in racial politics and acts to divide workers and keep them tied to the Democratic Party of Wall Street. During the gubernatorial election last year he ran against Andrew Cuomo on the ticket of the “black-led” Freedom Party. He has repeatedly labeled the school closures “racist,” as have several other local Democratic Party politicians.

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT), for its part, has fully subordinated itself to the authority of the panel. After one of the meetings, UFT President Michael Mulgrew cynically remarked, “It does not matter what happens in that puppet panel in there.” Yet the UFT has allowed every teacher layoff, every school closing, every budget cut to go ahead.

Integrally tied to the Democratic Party and supporting the Race To The Top legislation enabling the attacks to close schools and co-locate charters, the UFT channels the opposition of teachers and parents into endless

court cases, petitions and rallies that are designed to obscure the central political issues raised by the catastrophic attacks on public education. The closures cannot be successfully opposed one at a time or through the methods of pleading and protest. They pose the urgent need to unite the working class in a socialist political alternative.

After the mass walkout on February 3, a New York City teacher from one of the schools that has been closed, who is a supporter of the Socialist Equality Party, was finally able to take the floor. He addressed the remainder of the audience, which was still vigorously protesting the decisions of the PEP.

“Those who walked out were right,” he said. “Bloomberg and the DOE will not listen because they are part of a united attack of big business, not only on education, but jobs, health care and affordable housing. We cannot defend public education and all other democratic and social rights unless we unite working people in a new political party. Bloomberg is closing schools with hundreds of thousands of students in favor of the co-location of privatized schools. Cuomo is slashing the education budget on all schools by \$1.5 billion, and you can count on charters feeling that too.

“Obama is driving the attack on tenure protection for teachers, as well as advocating testing as evaluation, and charters. This is a political struggle for power to defend public education and all democratic and social rights, the reorganization of society to provide the trillions in funds for schools and jobs, and that requires replacing the Democrats and Republicans.”

The SEP supporter pointed to the revolutionary struggles developing in Egypt and Tunisia, stressing that American working people face the same challenges and explaining that the *World Socialist Web Site* and International Students for Social Equality stand for the independent struggles of the working class and the fight for a socialist program.



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