

An attack on public education

Detroit's Catherine Ferguson Academy to become for-profit charter school

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On June 16, in the face of growing anger and popular opposition to the closure of Catherine Ferguson Academy (CFA), the Detroit political establishment announced that the school would be transformed into a for-profit charter school.

The decision to turn CFA, an award-winning school for pregnant and parenting teens in Detroit, into a charter operation is an attack on public education. It is quite likely that at least for a section of the Detroit establishment, the transformation of CFA into a charter was the desired outcome from the beginning.

The school will now be operated by Evans Solutions, Inc., a for-profit company that has specialized in "strict discipline academies" for students with legal problems. Evans will also get control of Barsamian and Hancock Prep Centers, two schools for students who have been expelled from the Detroit Public Schools system. The company is owned by Blair Evans, the brother of Warren Evans, the former Detroit police chief and former sheriff for Wayne County.

Teachers will see their rights and even the most minimal job security stripped away. There will be no guarantee to students and parents that the vital programs established by CFA, or the school itself, will be maintained. The prime purpose of the school will be to operate as an organ of profit for a private company.

On the same day that the decision was announced, teachers were called in for a meeting where they were informed that they would lose all rights.

A teacher from CFA told the WSWWS that the school's principal, Asenath Andrews, informed them that the teachers "could be fired at any time... When she told us the school would open as a charter we felt good for the girls, but we also realized this was not a good

deal for the teachers."

The teachers were told that their wages for summer jobs had already been cut following discussions between Emergency Financial Manager (EFM) Roy Roberts and Andrews. The new agreement reportedly cuts their wages to \$27.00/hour, from \$32.50, or 17 percent. Day care workers had their wage cut from \$16.00/hour to \$15.00. This is no doubt only the beginning of the wage reductions.

The transformation of CFA into a charter school is part of an overall plan by the Detroit political and corporate establishment, backed by the Obama administration, to undermine the entire system of public education in the city.

Emergency Financial Manager (EFM) Roy Roberts and the Democratic Party establishment heralded the decision, calling it a victory for the community. It was also hailed by the pseudo-left supporters of the Democratic Party, in particular the organization BAMN (By Any Means Necessary), which has organized protests and rallies against the closure.

BAMN's specialty is the promotion of racial politics and support for a section of the Democratic Party and trade union establishment in Detroit. The decision to convert CFA into a charter school was made public just one hour before a scheduled rally organized by BAMN on Thursday. BAMN apparently was informed of the decision well ahead of the public announcement, passing out a leaflet at the rally announcing the conversion into a charter school.

Nicole Conaway, a teacher at CFA and a member of BAMN, chaired the event, which became a semi-official celebration of the Detroit establishment.

“Keeping CFA open is a major victory,” stated Conaway. “This is a victory for the new Civil Rights movement, a victory for everyone,” announced Shanta Driver, the national leader of BAMN, before the rally.

In hailing the privatization of CFA as a victory, BAMN is seeking not only to promote the Democratic Party in Detroit, which is leading the attack on public education in the city. It is also driving a wedge between teachers, who will face an attack on their wages and benefits, and the students and their parents within the community.

After giving her speech, the BAMN President passed the microphone to JoAnne Watson. Watson is a member of the Detroit City Council who voted last week to cut an additional \$50 million more than the original \$200 million in cuts proposed by the city’s mayor, David Bing. During the exchange, the two shared a big hug.

Watson demagogically told the crowd that the city council would pass a resolution to keep CFA open. “It’s not just about Catherine Ferguson, its about the whole city,” she said, and then quickly left.

Following Watson, a UAW official, speaking on behalf of President Bob King, declared, “When we all stand together we can win. We need to appeal to [Governor] Snyder, don’t fight us, lift us!” The UAW has presided over the destruction of hundreds of thousands of auto jobs in the Detroit area and is currently in negotiations with the Big Three to impose yet another concessions contract on auto workers.

The threatened closure of CFA evoked widespread popular opposition among students, teachers and the broader community against the destruction of such a vital social resources. The decision to keep it open has understandably evoked a feeling of relief.

A sharp warning, however, is required. The Detroit political and corporate establishment has no interest in defending CFA. Their conscious strategy is to shut down large sections of the public school system, while subordinating the rest to the direct operations of for-profit companies. Nationally, the Obama administration is now spearheading the drive to expand charter schools while slashing education spending.

The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers, students and the Detroit community to reject the transformation

of CFA into a charter school. The defense of CFA must be linked to a struggle to unite all sections of the working class in a common fight against the shutdown and privatization of public schools, in Detroit, throughout Michigan and across the country. This means a determined fight against the politics promoted by groups like BAMN, which works to divide workers along racial lines.

All schools slated for closure must be kept open, and those that have been shut down must be reopened. Charter operations like Evans Solutions have no business running education and should be kicked out.

There must be a massive infusion of funds into the Detroit Public School system, along with school districts throughout the metropolitan area, to develop programs and technology, hire thousands more teachers at increased wages and reduce class sizes. The claim that there is “no money” for such a program is a fraud. The entire budget for public education is a small fraction of the wealth of the richest one percent of the population.

The defense of public education is ultimately a political struggle, which pits workers against both the Republican and Democratic Parties. The basic rights of the working class are not compatible with the preservation of the capitalist system which they defend, a system that subordinates everything to the profit interests of the corporate and financial elite.



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