

US teachers' union endorses Obama for 2012 election

Alexander Fangmann, Jerry White
6 July 2011

The National Education Association—whose 3.2 million members have been a major target of the Obama administration's attack on public school teachers—became the first major union to endorse the Democratic president's reelection bid in 2012.

On Monday, 72 percent of the 8,000 delegates attending the union's national convention in Chicago endorsed the president for a second term. "President Barack Obama shares our vision for a stronger America," Dennis Van Roekel, president of NEA, declared. "He has never wavered from talking about the importance of education or his dedication to a vibrant middle class."

Indeed, the president never stops talking about the importance of education while his administration wages an unrelenting war against public education on behalf of the financial and corporate interests that are setting out to destroy it.

As for the president's dedication to a "vibrant middle class" Van Roekel must be referring to the upper-middle-class managers who run the American trade unions. The NEA president made \$397,721 in total compensation last year, nearly six times the salary of an average public school teacher.

As for rank-and-file teachers, the president has only shown a dedication to destroying their jobs and living standards and to vilify them for poor student performance that is largely the result of poverty and decades of school cuts.

Hardly a day goes by without a report of some new attack on teachers and public education. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, since August of 2008 over 200,000 positions in local school districts have been eliminated. Another 227,000 teachers and staff face the axe in 2011-12, according to the American Association of School Administrators.

In school districts like Detroit—"Ground Zero" in the president's campaign for school "reform"—dozens of schools have been closed or turned over to privately operated charter schools. Throughout the country teachers have been victimized, forced to take pay cuts, work longer hours without additional compensation, and suffer layoffs as a result of budget cuts.

President Obama applauded the decision of school authorities in Rhode Island to fire all of the teachers and staff at Central Falls High School when they rejected a "turnaround" plan that would have involved major concessions, saying the school board was "showing courage and doing the right thing for kids."

Arne Duncan, Obama's Secretary of Education and the author of that turnaround plan, has been charged with implementing this model all over the country after overseeing its expansion in Chicago when he was the Chicago Public Schools CEO.

Many states have now implemented education "reform" bills, designed to win money from Obama's Race to the Top program, by implementing teacher evaluations based on student test scores, eliminating teacher tenure, lowering the standards for teacher education, expanding the use of charter schools, and carrying out mass firings at so-called poorly performing schools. The result has been a disaster, with masses of students displaced and tens of thousands of teachers out of work.

In this attack, the NEA and the other major teachers union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have been full partners. Far from opposing the destruction of public education, the NEA and AFT executives fully agree that the working class must pay for the economic crisis and the systematic transfer of wealth into the hands of the financial elite carried out by Republicans and Democrats alike.

In private, NEA officials told teachers Obama is the “lesser evil” compared to the Republicans. But the Obama administration has gone further in attacking the rights and living standards of teachers than any Republican administration. The NEA endorsement of Obama is motivated solely by the narrow institutional concerns of the labor apparatus.

Unlike the Republicans—who have sought to destroy or circumvent the unions—the Democratic Party has utilized the services of the NEA and AFT to implement its attacks. By continuing to lavish tens of millions in campaign contributions on this big business party, the labor bureaucracy hopes to preserve its legal and financial interests, especially its ability to deduct dues from teachers’ dwindling paychecks. While imposing pay cuts on its members, the NEA voted at the convention to raise the level of union dues.

The NEA delegates also voted to support “teacher evaluation” methods based on student achievement, which have been used to facilitate the firing of educators across the country. In doing so, the NEA said it wanted to play a greater role in determining which teachers would be terminated.

The NEA and AFT are thoroughly hostile to the interests of teachers. When teachers spearheaded a fight against Republican Governor Scott Walker’s anti-worker bill in Wisconsin, the NEA-affiliated Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) worked with the Democrats to sabotage the struggle. It then rushed to sign contract extensions that gave up everything—freezing wages, requiring higher pension contributions and introducing health insurance payments—in return for the continued collection of union dues.

In Illinois, the NEA and AFT collaborated with the Democratic-controlled state government in crafting the “reform” legislation known as Senate Bill 7, which imposes longer school workdays and years without compensation, facilitates the firing of teachers and all but criminalizes the right to strike. Again, however, the labor managers maintain a “seat at the table” to impose these attacks.

Although the NEA is the first union to endorse Obama, it is only the first of what will be many endorsements. The Democratic Party is thoroughly right-wing and anti-worker, but for the union officialdom this is something they can live with, since

the Democrats employ their services to push through their agenda.

Some concern was voiced among delegates about the endorsement of Obama, given the record of attacks. Clearly sensing the unease among some of the delegates, Vice President Joe Biden gave a demagogic speech saying any differences with the union were “more a fight within the family” than a fundamental disagreement.

The NEA endorsement underscores the necessity for teachers and all those that oppose the attack on public education to break with this rotten organization, and develop a political movement—based on a socialist program—to fight the Obama administration and the capitalist system, which it defends.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact