

The assault on public education in America

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The ruling class in the United States is intensifying its campaign to dismantle public education.

With the new fiscal year that began yesterday, states throughout the country are slashing education funding, leading to the layoff of tens of thousands of teachers and the closure of hundreds of schools.

Both the Democratic and Republican parties are using the fiscal crisis—the outcome of decades of tax cuts to the rich, the bailout of the banks, and an economic crash caused by rampant speculation—as an opportunity to undermine and eliminate public education.

In 2010 alone, 151,000 state and local education workers were laid off. In the coming school year, a further 227,000 layoffs are planned, according to a recent survey by the American Association of School Administrators. This is the elimination, in just one year, of 2.2 percent of the 10.3 million state and local education workers in the US.

California is cutting university funding by 23 percent, on top of earlier cuts, which will lead to further tuition hikes. Florida is cutting 15,000 children from a school readiness program for low-income families. Michigan is cutting spending on K-12 education by \$470 per student, which will force local districts to lay off teachers and shut down schools. New York, the home state of Wall Street, is cutting its education budget by 6.1 percent. The list goes on and on.

These cuts will be felt at the city and local level. New York and Chicago are laying off even more education workers. Last week, Chicago announced the layoff of 1,000 teachers, on top of the 3,000 that were laid off last year.

In Detroit, upheld by the Obama administration as a model for the entire country, more than forty schools are slated to be shut down or sold off to charter operators. As in many other cities, these cuts are being finalized over the summer break in order to preempt opposition from students, parents and teachers. When

classes resume, young people will be presented with the accomplished fact that a third of the schools in the city were closed or sold.

In Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and other cities, teachers have been forced into signing contracts that cut their pay, increase their hours and give administrators the right to fire them for any reason.

The attack on public education is a bipartisan policy. Governors, mayors, and state legislators—Democrat and Republican alike—are working in tandem to close and charterize schools.

The entire process is overseen by the Obama administration, which has made “education reform” a key component of its domestic agenda. Obama has tied additional funding through the “race to the top program” to the expansion of charter schools and the implementation of punitive measures against teachers, such as merit pay.

Obama has deliberately blamed teachers for the crisis of education, praising the mass firing of educators at “failing schools.” Meanwhile, the Wall Street speculators responsible for the economic crisis have been given a free pass, and indeed are now wealthier than ever.

Equally culpable are the trade unions, which have worked with the Obama administration to implement its attack on education. Amid mass layoffs and wage cuts, the teachers’ unions have rejected any struggle. In fact, they have supported the expansion of charters and the sell-off of schools, the destruction of tenure, and the entire framework of the fiscal crisis, demanding only that their right to collect dues from their members be protected.

The dismantling of public education represents a historic turning point in the United States. The concept that everyone should have access to education provided by the state, one long central to American democracy, is under attack.

Social progress in the United States has been associated with the extension of democracy and public education. The most democratic and enlightened leaders of the American Revolution, such as Franklin and Jefferson, campaigned to expand public education as the basis for democracy.

Horace Mann, the “father of American public education,” fought in the pre-Civil War period to “equalize the conditions of men” through the expansion of universal, high-quality education, provided by well-trained, professional educators.

One of the consequences of the Civil War was the growth of public education in the South, for both poor whites and freed slaves. The southern slavocracy worked deliberately to stifle education and literacy, to the point of making it illegal for slaves to learn how to read.

“I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one,” noted the abolitionist Frederick Douglass. The present-day financial oligarchs—who are just as ruthless as the slaveholders defeated with fire and sword in the Civil War—subscribe to the same principle.

In the 20th Century, the expansion of education was bound up with the struggles of the working class, given impetus by the Russian Revolution. The mass strikes of workers in the first half of the century had as a byproduct the immense growth of access to public education for millions of people. This was bound up as well with health care programs and a general rise in the living standards of a significant section of workers.

The Civil Rights movements as well had as a central aim the extension of decent public education to African Americans.

All of this is now being reversed. The attack on education is one manifestation of a social counterrevolution, in the United States and internationally: the assault on the gains made by the working class over decades of struggle.

Underlying this attack is a historic reversal in the position of the United States. If the expansion of public education was associated with the growth of American capitalism, the attack has been associated with a period of decline.

There is a class policy at work. The financial aristocracy that has arisen along with, and indeed as a product of, this decline, has absolute contempt for

democratic and egalitarian principles at the heart of public education. This aristocracy has a stranglehold over the entire political system and controls both the Democratic and Republican Parties.

Free, universal public education is a democratic, not a specifically socialist, demand. The defense and expansion of public education, however, is incompatible with a society whose fundamental principle is inequality, a society in which trillions are handed to the banks and the entire political and media establishment proclaims that there is “no money” to keep schools open and to pay teachers a decent wage.

Public education can be defended only through the struggle for socialism: that is, to the extension of the principle of equality to every aspect of life, through the establishment of democratic control by the working class over the economy. The central impulse of public education, to “equalize the conditions of men,” must become the watchword of a new political struggle by the working class.

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