

Defend public education!

Phyllis Scherrer, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Vice President
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As a schoolteacher for the past 15 years, I share the outrage felt by millions of teachers and other school workers over the ongoing assault on public education. Budget cuts at the local, state and federal level have devastated school funding, and hundreds of thousands of teaching jobs have been eliminated in the last three years. The Obama administration has taken a leading role in this attack, promoting charter schools, privatization and attacks on wages, working conditions and job security for teachers.

This week marked a new stage in this attack, with one of the Republican presidential candidates, Rick Santorum, the former senator from Pennsylvania, openly opposing the basic principle of universal public education as an “anachronism.” He denounced what he called “factory schools”—schools where all children, not merely the children of the privileged, have access to education, from basic literacy to the heights of human culture.

Santorum is only venting in the most disgusting and reactionary fashion the hatred that the ruling class of multimillionaires feels for the principles of democracy and equal rights for working people. They are creating a nightmare America that replaces “of the people, by the people and for the people” with “of the rich, by the rich and for the rich.”

Both of the parties that serve corporate America, the Democrats and the Republicans, are responsible for the deterioration of conditions in the schools. In Pennsylvania, where I have taught for the past 15 years, I have seen education systematically undermined under both Democratic and Republican governors and Democratic and Republican presidents.

The Bush administration devised its “No Child Left Behind” program to promote over-testing of children and punitive closing of schools as a bipartisan measure with the leading liberal Democrat, Senator Edward Kennedy. This has been succeeded by Obama’s “Race

to the Top” program, which uses financial grants to a handful of states to promote school privatization and mass firings of teachers as in Central Falls, Rhode Island.

The assault on public education is an outcome of the growth of social inequality in America, which, in turn, is the product of the historical decay of American and world capitalism. The immense and growing chasm between the top 1 percent of society and the broad mass of the population is incompatible with democratic principles and the social reforms of the past, including the establishment of public education.

The expansion of public education in the 19th and 20th centuries was driven by a profound belief that in a democracy, every citizen should be literate and have access to culture, and that every child—whether their parents were former slaves, day laborers or immigrants who spoke no English—was educable. Moreover, it was well understood that cold, hungry and needy children could not learn as well as their peers. For this reason, educators fought for social reforms to provide a minimal safety net to children and families in poverty.

This fundamental social gain of working people is under attack as never before. In Pennsylvania, where I live, the state government under Republican Governor Tom Corbett has just enacted its second round of major budget cuts in education funding, for a total cut of nearly \$1.2 billion over two years. This is an openly class-based policy that has changed the funding formula that once provided additional funds for the poorest school districts. As a result, more than a dozen school districts may be forced to close their doors entirely, and teachers in one poor district, Chester Upland, are now working without pay.

The Democrats are no different. At Obama’s State of the Union address last month, where he praised the Race to the Top program for K-12 education and proposed a similar measure for higher education, a

teacher from the Chester Upland district, Sara Ferguson, was seated near Michelle Obama as a guest of the White House. The Obama administration declared these teachers “heroes” because they agreed to continue working for free after the district ran out of funding.

The conditions in the Chester Upland are the direct consequence of the policies supported by the Obama administration. Some 45 percent of students now attend two charter schools, diverting funding from public schools, forcing the layoff of half the public school work force, and creating an average class size of over 40 students in some schools. How is it possible to teach under these circumstances?

The two teachers unions, the NEA and AFT, have already endorsed Obama and will campaign for him in 2012, telling teachers that he is the defender of education. This only demonstrates the completely useless and rotten character of these old organizations. Working people, including teachers and parents of school children, need a new political party and a new political perspective to defend the right of public education.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only political movement fighting for the working class, to take hold of the reins of society and utilize the abundant resources available and created by it, for the benefit of all. A high-quality education, a right fought for by the working class over two centuries of struggle, is an absolute necessity.

In our election campaign the SEP will fight for teachers, students and parents to defend public education in a political struggle against the Obama administration, the Democrats and Republicans, and the capitalist system, which they all defend. I urge you to join this fight and support the SEP candidates for president and vice president.



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