

Protests against New York City school closings

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Three thousand parents, teachers and students in New York City attended a hearing of the Panel for Educational Policy (PEP) on February 9 to voice their outrage at the plans to close another 18 public schools, as well as the co-location of 22 small schools, including 5 charter schools, into existing facilities.

The PEP is controlled by Mayor Michael Bloomberg and routinely rubber-stamps all of the mayor's attacks on public education. The City Department of Education (DOE) has already closed 117 schools since Bloomberg took office 10 years ago.

The PEP will also be asked to place 33 schools under the Obama administration's "turn-around" model. They would close at the end of June and reopen the next day under different names, with half of the teachers labeled ineffective and fired in order restore federal "Race To The Top" funds that were lost because of the city's failure to finalize an agreement with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT).

The auditorium at Brooklyn Technical High School was packed up through the balcony with an audience that was brought largely by parents' groups and student and community organizations, as well as the teachers' union. The crowd shouted down the mayoral puppets on the PEP, chanting "Shame!," "Whose schools? Our schools!" and "This is what democracy looks like!" Parents and students from threatened schools were joined by college students facing related battles against budget cuts. A banner hung from the balcony by supporters from the City University of New York said "K to CUNY, Education is a right." There were scores of protesters who identified themselves as supporters of the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Police patrolled the aisle, with a line of police set up in front of the stage at one point. After three hours, much of the audience left in disgust, and the votes to ratify the

closings were taken only then.

There have been protests every week across the city, and more are planned, as the DOE holds required hearings at each of the individual schools on the pretense that the government will respond to concerns and demands of the working class communities. Those looking for a way to fight back are finding, however, that the unions and their backers have no intention of leading a serious struggle.

The unions' aim is to channel the growing anger of workers and students back into the two-party system, particularly the Democrats. They made no challenge to the local Democratic politicians, whom they routinely endorse, as they voiced the empty claim that "we are not going to let [the closings] happen." The day before the PEP hearing, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), parent body of the UFT, endorsed Barack Obama's re-election, despite his administration's increasingly vicious attacks on public education, including school closings and teacher evaluations based on student scores in standardized tests, support for privatization through charter schools, and removal of teacher job protections.

Only a few hundred teachers were organized by the UFT, out of a membership of more than 100,000, to attend the PEP hearing. Hundreds of thousands of other workers in New York, including transit, postal, nurses and school bus drivers, not to mention immigrants and the unemployed, are under attack, but the unions are determined to prevent a united political struggle against the corporate and financial elite.

Lining up behind the UFT are various fake-"left" groups like the International Socialist Organization (ISO). Supporters of the ISO claimed they were going to take over the PEP meeting and vote down the closings. They interrupted students and parents who had come to express their sincere desire to stop the closings, shouting over them so they could not be heard.

Behind protest stunts like this is the refusal to pose the

fundamental political questions. Workers can see more and more clearly that they have no voice within the present system, either at the PEP or through the Democratic Party. This anger and protest must be guided by a political perspective and program. A supporter of the Socialist Equality Party was the only speaker at the meeting who raised these issues, denouncing the treachery of the UFT, calling for a break from the Democrats, and explaining that the SEP election campaign had just been launched to fight for a new socialist leadership in the working class.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with teachers, parents and students who attended the meeting about the attacks on the schools.

Stacey Thomas, a Samuel Gompers High School electronics teacher, commented: “The decisions tonight include whether to phase out Gompers, Jane Addams and other CTEs [Career and Technical Education schools]. The charter schools that are being opened up in our schools are new and have no past record.

“The CTEs are big schools. The powers that be want the real estate. We have a lot of space because we have rooms where they could drive a car in. We don’t have auto mechanics any more. They phased that out a while ago. We need a school that has training for more advanced skills. At Bronx High School of Science [a highly selective school], students are motivated on their own. However, that is a struggle at our school. It could be language problems, homelessness. It could be problems with gangs.”

A student from Gompers, Joseph Duarte, asked, “How do you close schools when they don’t even give the resources needed to improve? Our textbooks are old. In one of them, the last president is Harry Truman.”

Yolanda is the parent of a 10-year-old at PS 22 and a 12-year old at the Academy of Business and Community Development in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, both slated for closing: “I don’t understand why they have to close the schools. Just make the appropriate changes to the system by giving the proper funding and services that the school administrators and teachers need to teach the children: tutoring, more teachers in the classroom, more arts in the schools, music. There is so much testing, testing after testing, instead of focusing on teaching and giving kids a zeal for learning.

“Whatever we say, the panel is going to do whatever it wants anyway. I figure there is money involved. It is like a dictatorship. Our elected officials are supposed to be for us.”

Mark Griffith, a teacher and a UFT delegate from Middle School (MS) 447 in Brooklyn, told the WSWS, “The school closures are ruining public education. Basically, they are closing schools in neighborhoods with numbers of students with special needs or ESL [English as Second Language] students. These students struggle to begin with. Special needs and ESL students particularly need individual attention, but the focus on test preparation doesn’t allow for this. They say these tests are more important than the needs of an individual child. This is the business model of education.”

Shirley Lyle is a paraprofessional, also at MS 447. She added, “Bloomberg has had 10 years to fix anything he wanted to fix in these schools, but all he wants to do is close them down. Moreover, what he really wants to do is replace them with charter schools. The money that is going to charter schools should be used for public education. Basically, the charter schools are private schools being paid for with public money. Big business and private interests are driving it. With the charter schools, they are pitting students against students and parents against parents. They pit teachers in public schools against teachers in private charter schools. It is a matter of pushing the unionized teachers and workforce out of public schools. Bloomberg and the DOE are for this. Obama is for this, and [New York governor Andrew] Cuomo is the same.

“Look at our contracts. We have given back so much. Bloomberg wants to dismantle our pay, working conditions and our protections.

“It seems like we have no choice with the Democrats and Republicans. I’m not sure what it would look like, but I am for a third party.”

Q. Escobar, a teacher in the Bronx, agreed about these issues. “It seems like the unionized workers, which are the middle class, are being eliminated, so there will be just a top and a bottom, rich or poor, which will be easier to control.” Asked about the UFT endorsing Obama, she said, “I don’t think the union should be endorsing. You vote for the better liar.”



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