

Protests continue against New York school closings

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New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg's plans to close 26 schools have provoked a series of angry protests in New York City. Teachers, parents and students have turned out at public hearings and demonstrations to oppose the shutdowns along with co-locations of privately run but publicly funded charter schools into already overcrowded school buildings, budget cuts, and a regime of standardized testing of students that is being used to vilify teachers.

Taken together, these policies represent a clear and present danger to the survival of public education in the country's largest school district. Yet the public opposition to this policy has been channeled into a series of diversionary actions dominated by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), and those who support its role as a junior partner of the big business Democratic Party.

Bloomberg's strategy is centered on a "turnaround" model that involves closing schools and reopening them the next day under different names, allowing for only half of the estimated 2,600 teachers to be rehired, with the rest to become substitutes. Budget cutting has slashed the number of teaching positions by 10,000 since 2007.

Bloomberg claims his plan is necessary to win back \$60 million lost to the city's school system for not meeting President Obama's evaluation requirements that New York State had signed into law in February. Bloomberg's plan is part of the movement, promoted nationally by Obama, of educational restructuring that leads toward removing job protections for teachers, turning them into a cheap and transient workforce. The aim is to boost corporate profits through the privatization of the public schools, the establishment of charter schools and educational services.

Since the billionaire Bloomberg became mayor, 140

schools have been closed and 589 new, small schools have been "co-located" into mostly the same facilities, 139 of them being charter schools. Bloomberg has announced 54 new schools to be opened next fall, 25 of which will be charters. While studies have shown that charters as a whole do no better than public schools, charters often siphon off space and resources, while leaving the public schools with a greater concentration of higher-needs students. This in turn results in unmet test score goals that become an excuse for more closings.

To carry out the 26 closings and another 32 co-locations, the Department of Education (DOE) has been required to hold hearings in schools, accompanied by protests from school communities, almost every school night for weeks. There is no doubt that the Panel for Educational Policy (PEP) appointed by the mayor will rubber-stamp his decisions.

These attacks come from the Democratic as well as the Republican party. With an eye on the 2012 election, both the UFT and the fake-left groups that pose as an opposition within the union have united to focus their attack on Bloomberg and mayoral control, studiously avoiding reference to the Obama administration authorship of the "turnaround option" for closing public schools and the drive to expand privately run charter schools. They also ignore New York State governor Andrew Cuomo's budget cuts and the new, oppressive teacher evaluation system, cosponsored by the UFT. The leading Democratic candidates for mayor have also agreed with Bloomberg that the working class must pay for the economic crisis.

As a result, the defense of the right of the working class to education has been turned into a series of impotent rallies, along with TV commercials aimed at pressuring the corporate politicians. As teachers,

parents and students saw their protests having no results, the turnout for these events has become smaller, even while hundreds still turned out for explosive hearings at individual schools.

Finding they were losing attendance for their protests at the PEP hearings, the UFT decided to stage an April 26 protest at City Hall to “take our message straight to the puppet-master.” In fact, the demonstration is merely another maneuver to harmlessly dissipate anger, while giving union bureaucrats and Democrats a platform to condemn education “reforms” that they have allowed to go through for the last 10 years.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to teachers and students at protests against the school closings and attacks on public education. Jennifer Huggley, a mathematics high school teacher for 13 years, who teaches at the Cobble Hill School of American Studies, spoke to the WSWS at a recent rally organized by the UFT at the DOE offices in Brooklyn, against the publication of the names and ranking of teachers by their student test scores.

“We are all working very hard, and we work for the benefit of the students,” she said. “It is disheartening to know people don’t value our work. These children are on the cusp of the rest of their lives, and we try to give them normalcy. No Child Left Behind put these tests and evaluations into place. Each president tries to outdo the previous one. Children have become pawns in politics. Accountability is valid, but all kids learn differently, so holding teachers accountable for individual students is not valid. The data is skewed to show teachers’ inadequacy when all students don’t learn at the same pace.”

Last month, 80 students of Satellite Academy and Bronx Regional High School walked out of the school in protest of the planned co-location of a third school into the building, the ROADS Charter School 2. At the DOE hearing held at the school, William Foehrenback of Satellite Academy, a history teacher for 13 years, explained: “The first inkling we got of this was when we learned we were getting security cameras, which we haven’t needed. This school is a very safe environment. The application of the ROADS charter school to the State University of New York says their stakeholders are community members dedicated to the success of students involved in the criminal justice system.

“We also serve such students gladly. But there is a

difference if they are concentrating that population. Both Bronx Regional and Satellite are transfer schools [for undercredited, overaged students]. It seems like this system is creating a mechanism for segregating kids coming out of lock-up. What we are worried about is in a year this school will feel like a Juvenile Detention Center. We get \$8,000 per student. ROADS would get \$14,500 per student. A prime mover of the ROADS schools is Mark Gallogly [the head of Centerbridge Partners, a private equity firm]. He has an office in the White House.”

Aeisha Vegas, a junior at Satellite Academy, explained to the WSWS: “The problem is we are a school on one floor. There is not enough movement for everyone. We are like a pack of sardines. They said the charter co-location would take 47 percent of our space. The gym and lunchroom are already used by Satellite, Bronx Regional, and GED. If the charter comes in, we all have to share Bronx Regional’s library.

“I believe the co-locations are business. There is money out there that could build buildings for charter schools. It is about profit. Mayor Bloomberg is going after the poor neighborhoods; 32 schools in the Bronx were closed down.

“If you care about education, you don’t close schools, you help them. Obama was the new black president that was going to help us. But when it comes down to money, people change. You may think the Democrats and Republicans are different. They work the same way. If Obama wanted to help us, this would not be happening now. He would have helped out New York.”



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