

No to school privatization!

Statement by Phyllis Scherrer, SEP candidate for US vice president

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As the Socialist Equality Party candidate for vice president of the United States, I denounce the recently announced plans to convert all the public schools in Muskegon Heights and Highland Park, Michigan into for-profit charters. These actions represent a new and unprecedented attack on the right to public education. They are part of a nation-wide campaign by the ruling class to undermine public schools, spearheaded by the Obama administration.

In Muskegon Heights, a state appointed Emergency Manager has used the district's ongoing budget crisis as a rationale for turning the public schools over to a for-profit charter operator. All teachers and staff have been fired and must reapply for their jobs.

In Highland Park, the Emergency Manager in charge of the public schools has also proposed turning the entire district over to a charter operator. All the district's teachers will likewise have to reapply for their jobs with whatever company is finally selected.

Michigan is at the center of attacks carried out across the United States. The promotion of charter schools is aimed at both attacking the wages and benefits of teachers, and further reducing the quality of education available to the vast majority of working class youth.

In Detroit, scores of public schools have been closed and many turned into charters. The wages and benefits of teachers have been gutted. The state already has almost one-quarter of the charter schools operating in the country, with the vast majority being for-profit. A new law passed by the Michigan legislature exempts charter schools from collective bargaining agreements in their respective districts.

In Washington DC the chancellor of the public schools has announced that the district may close as many as three dozen public schools and replace them with charters.

The Pennsylvania legislature is considering a bill that would funnel \$200 million in public funds to private and parochial schools. The legislation is backed by Wal-Mart and other wealthy proponents of school privatization.

In New Orleans, where charter schools now enroll 75 percent of all students, a group of parents have filed a lawsuit alleging discrimination, complaining that several schools refused to enroll special education students, kicked them out or failed to provide proper services.

Indeed, charter schools, which are financed with taxpayer money but enjoy little or no transparency and accountability, as opposed to traditional public schools, skim the best students from their communities and are less likely to enroll students with special needs. A report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, which cites the suit in New Orleans, noted that some of the students, whose disabilities range from ADHD to autism, missed months of school because they couldn't find a school that would admit them.

President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan are leading the promotion of charter schools and the attack on public education. The Obama administration has made "education reform" a key part of its public agenda, tying the promotion of charter schools and punitive measures against teachers such as merit pay to additional funding through the "race to the top" program.

The teachers unions are working in tandem with the Obama administration in carrying out these attacks. They have offered support for the spread of charter schools and the attacks on the jobs and wages of teachers as long as their right to collect union dues is unimpaired.

The federal government is standing by as states throughout the country, under both Republican and Democratic governors, respond to massive budget deficits with huge cuts in education budgets.

At stake is the very existence of public education, an institution with historical roots that go back to the American Revolution. The founders of the United States, men such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, saw the advance of public education as an essential basis for democracy.

Educational reformers such as Horace Mann and John Dewey viewed the expansion of public education as the cornerstone of a humane and equitable society. Every social advance in the United States has been bound up with the expansion of public education.

One of the achievements coming out of the Civil War was the growth of public education in the South, for both poor whites and freed slaves. It was no accident that the southern slavocracy made it a serious crime to teach a slave how to read.

A byproduct of the mass working class struggles over the course of the past century was the expanded access to educational opportunities. However, all of these past gains are now under attack by the financial aristocracy on Wall Street, which is no less retrograde in its social outlook than the old southern slavocracy.

Big business more and more looks at public education as an intolerable drain on the profits it extracts from the labor of the working class. It is determined to roll back the clock of history, making a decent education a luxury available only to those who are able to pay for it.

At the same time as K-12 schools are being dismantled, tuition and fees at colleges and universities is soaring—pricing out many working class young people, or condemning them to a lifetime of excessive debt. And why should the ruling class care to educate young people? It has in store for the next generation only a future of war, unemployment and low-wage work.

These same measures are being implemented in countries throughout the world. In Quebec, Canada, students have been engaged in a months-long struggle against tuition hikes. The ruling class everywhere has responded to the capitalist crisis by seeking to implement a historic reversal in the conditions of life for working people.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that education is a basic social right. We reject the claim that the money does not exist to fund free, high quality public education for all. Under conditions of deepening economic crisis for the vast majority, America's financial elite has never done so well. Oracle CEO Larry Ellison is buying the entire Hawaiian Island of Lanai, the sixth largest in the chain, for an estimated \$500 – \$600 million. His personal fortune, in excess of \$36 billion, is larger than the entire education budget for most US states.

I call for a vast expansion of funding for education at the primary, secondary and college level. Billions of dollars must be made available to construct new, state of the art schools and upgrade existing buildings. Hundreds of thousands of new teachers must be hired and all wage and benefit cuts rescinded.

The defense and expansion of the public education system is possible only through the reorganization of economic life as a whole, on a world scale. The egalitarian conceptions that are at the root of public education are incompatible with a society whose fundamental principle is inequality.

The fight to defend public education, and all the social rights of the working class, is bound up with the fight for socialism, the democratic ownership and control of the means of production by the working class.

The fight for these policies requires the independent political mobilization of the working class through committees of students, educators and parents. Workers must break with the Democrats and Republicans, the parties of Wall Street and build an independent party of their own, based on a socialist program. I call on all workers and young people who support these policies to support my campaign and that of my running mate Jerry White for president, and join the Socialist Equality Party!



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