The issues facing teachers in the 2012 elections

Statement by Phyllis Scherrer, SEP US vice presidential candidate

Phyllis Scherrer (SEP US vice presidential candidate)
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The following statement was issued by Phyllis Scherrer, the Socialist Equality Party vice presidential candidate in the 2012 elections. Scherrer is a teacher in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area.

In the upcoming US presidential elections, teachers, along with all workers, are presented by the political establishment with a "choice" between two candidates—Mitt Romney and Barack Obama—who are equally committed to escalating the attack on the working class, in the United States and abroad.

The real agenda of these two big-business candidates is being concealed from the American people. A central component of the program of the corporate and financial elite is the undermining and ultimate dismantling of public education, an institution going back hundreds of years. The shutting of public schools, the promotion of charter operations, the victimization of teachers—this is an agenda embraced by the Democratic Party no less than the Republican.

The experience of the past three and a half years has been highly instructive for teachers and the working class as a whole. Many teachers across the country voted for Obama in 2008 with the hope that his administration would end the assault on public education, exemplified in the hated No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

What teachers got was something much worse: fewer resources, increased testing and greater attacks on teachers. Under the fraudulent banner of "reform," Obama has vastly escalated a bipartisan attack on the basic social right to education.

What is Obama's record? A partial list includes:

1) The appointment of Arne Duncan, a Harvard-educated lawyer turned education "reformer" and former CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, as secretary of education.

2) The implementation of the Race to the Top (RTTT) program in 2009, under the leadership of Duncan, to pressure states throughout the country to increase charter schools, privatize education, shut down "failing schools," and expand testing as a method of victimizing teachers for the crisis of public education.

3) The president's enthusiastic support for the mass firing of seventy-four Central Falls, Rhode Island teachers and 19 other school employees in 2010, after they rejected a "turnaround" plan which would have torn up their contract and forced them to work longer hours without additional pay. This was to be a model to force through the administration's right-wing school agenda throughout the country.

4) The starving of states and school districts throughout the country for resources. The Obama administration has spent trillions of dollars to bail out the banks, even as local governments, facing budget shortfalls, have laid off hundreds of thousands of educators. In this context, Obama's claim to want to hire more teachers is the grossest hypocrisy.

Hundreds of schools across the country have been closed and hundreds more have been turned into charter schools. Many cities have engaged in large-scale public school closings in the past decade. As of the summer of 2011, at least 200 schools stood vacant in Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City, Mo., Milwaukee, Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C. This included 92 in Detroit alone.

Over the past decade, the ruling elite has abandoned measures to alleviate poverty and other social ills that undermine learning. The lie pushed for decades by the far right and currently promoted by Obama is that it is the "personal responsibility" of both students and teachers to raise test scores, and prevent schools from being closed and privatized.

The American ruling class has repudiated any commitment to providing public education to all. On the contrary, it is

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systematically abrogating this most essential democratic and social right.

There is mass opposition to these policies. This was evident in the Chicago teachers' strike this year, which gave expression to deep hostility to the entire agenda of school privatization, and to the commitment of teachers to the defense of public education. The strike pitted teachers against the Democratic Party—in the persona of Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama's former chief of staff and one of his top fundraisers. Emanuel is pushing through in Chicago what the Obama administration supports on a national level.

In the midst of an election season, in which billions of dollars are being spent on mutual attack ads, the Republican Party vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan entered the fray to declare his support for Emanuel against the teachers. "Education reform is a bipartisan issue," he said.

What is true of "education reform"—i.e., the attack on public education—is true of the assault on the working class as a whole. Whatever their tactical differences, when it comes to the basic strategy of the ruling class, the two parties stand united.

The Chicago teachers' strike made it clear that the defense of the rights of the working class is fundamentally a political struggle against the two-party capitalist system. It also exposed the rotten role of the trade unions in preventing workers' opposition from breaking free of the stranglehold of the Democratic Party.

In the course of the strike, the Chicago Teachers Union sought to obscure the fundamental political issues, isolating the strike and quickly shutting it down. All the basic demands of the Emanuel administration were included in the deal pushed through by the CTU, setting the stage for the shutdown of over 100 public schools and the mass firing of teachers.

In fact, the attack on public education has been carried out with the blessings of the CTU's parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, and its president, Randi Weingarten. The AFT, along with the National Education Association (NEA), were among the first unions to support Obama's reelection bid. This has nothing to do with defending the interests of the working class. For teachers, it does not matter which big-business politician takes over the White House. The Democrats utilize the services of the unions to impose the attack on teachers, and in turn the unions are allowed to collect dues and pursue further business opportunities.

Underlying the role of the trade unions and their political adjuncts is their alliance with the Democratic Party and their defense of the capitalist system. They all accept the basic lie that there is no money for social rights like education, even as trillions are expended on bank bailouts and war.

An entirely different political strategy is required, one that begins with the conception that the defense of public education is incompatible with the capitalist system, an economic system in which all decisions are subordinated to the interests of the financial and corporate elite. The alternative to capitalism is socialism, a society based on genuine social equality.

The concept of public education emerged out of the bourgeois democratic revolutions, including the American Revolution. It was extended in the course of subsequent struggles, including the Civil War and the civil rights movement. Today, however, this basic right comes into conflict with the interests of a new financial aristocracy, which has no interest in educating the workers whom it plans to relegate to low-paying jobs and a dead-end future. Instead, they are looting public resources for their own enrichment.

New struggles will emerge over the fate of public education. As with all the struggles of workers, however, their success depends on the building of a new political leadership—based on a revolutionary socialist program. The defense of public education requires breaking the economic and political stranglehold of the ruling class, carrying out a radical redistribution of wealth, and the nationalizing the banks and major corporations, placing them under the social ownership and democratic control of the working class.

The purpose of the Socialist Equality Party election campaign is to build this leadership. We urge all teachers and workers throughout the country to draw the lessons of the past four years, attend one of our regional conferences, and make the decision to join and build the Socialist Equality Party.

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