

Hurricane Sandy compounds crisis facing public schools in New York City

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Thousands of teachers joined volunteers on the East Coast to help victims in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Sandy and subsequently, filling in the many gaps in government relief. This is no accident. On a daily basis educators make a dedicated effort in the face of official negligence and cuts to public schools, even as they are blamed for the growing crisis in education.

Two New York City teachers died in Hurricane Sandy—Jessie Streich-Kest was crushed by a tree and Henry Sullivan drowned in his home—and others lost family members.

In the wake of the storm, teachers had to deal both with their students' long- and short-term trauma, including deaths to family members or friends. Meanwhile, teachers had to restore a much needed routine to their students' lives, as well as make up for lost class time.

When New York City schools re-opened for their 1.1 million students and 100,000 staff a week after Hurricane Sandy hit, 57 of 1700 school buildings in New York City remained closed due to damage and 29 due to lack of electricity, while 16 were still serving as shelters for evacuees and 36 had no heat. It took another three weeks to bring the number of closed schools down to ten, most of them in the hard-hit Rockaways section of Queens.

Children in lower Manhattan and other areas lacking electricity did not have heat at home or in school against the cold weather. Many students whose homes were a total loss or damaged and are living elsewhere, including hotels and shelters, have been unable to attend their regular schools. Some schools opened late, or only partially, because evacuees sheltering in eight school buildings had to be shifted around to other floors or other buildings to allow schools to be cleaned up.

With the transit system only partially restored, many

teachers and students could not reach schools when they re-opened. Hundreds of thousands of students travel daily across the five boroughs of New York to attend schools of choice rather than neighborhood schools, not uncommonly for one or two hours each way. This is the result of policies promoting “market” competition as a solution to improve schools.

Before schools and transportation were fully functioning again parents had to scramble for child care, often an expense they could ill afford, while those who could not get to work lost income. With New York State schools mandated to have 180 days of classes, three days were removed from the February winter break, leaving families with vacation plans disrupted, losing money in some cases.

Hurricane Sandy only compounded the problems devastating New York City's public schools.

One-fifth of New York City's population is at or below the official poverty line and two-fifths of the 47,000 people in homeless shelters are children.

According to the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in September, a record 670 schools had 6,220 oversized classes, with 270 overcrowded special education classes in those schools. The New York City Department of Education has reduced the teaching force by 8,000 positions since 2005, to the point where it had to cancel plans last May to wipe out 2,500 more positions by attrition.

Under these conditions, 217 New York City schools received grades of F, D or a third consecutive C that could lead to closure, one fifth of all schools graded and nearly twice as many schools as last year.

All levels of government are promoting private charter schools to further open the way to profit-making.

In the last 10 years, 140 comprehensive schools in

New York closed while 589 small schools opened, mostly by co-locating into the same facilities, 136 of these being charters. Twenty-five of the fifty-four new schools planned for this year are charters.

Experienced teachers whose schools are closed down often find that principals of schools to which they apply do not want to hire them because their salaries may equal that of two new teachers. Rather than become substitutes sent from school to school toward the end of their careers, they retire as soon as they can.

Simultaneously, new teachers find themselves being turned into contract labor through the elimination of tenure. While in the past, 98 percent of teachers with three years' experience were granted tenure, last year only 55 percent of eligible teachers were given that legal job protection.

The preferred lever for privatization is the spurious evaluation of teachers and schools based on student test scores. Over 1,500 school principals, one-third of those in New York State, have signed an open letter criticizing the standardized test-based teacher evaluation framework based on Obama's "Race to the Top," agreed to by New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo and the New York State teachers' union.

The newly developed "Common Core Learning Standards," adopted in almost every state, will become another device to attack public schools and teachers. Every effort is made to divert attention from the real causes of "failing schools": social deprivation and the starving of the public schools of the funding they need.

The deteriorating conditions nationally created widespread support for the Chicago teachers' strike in September. The various state and local teachers' unions have claimed the strike was a victory, when, in fact, evaluations by tests and a longer school day were imposed. The Chicago teachers confronted Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama's former chief of staff and his major fundraiser. In effect, this was a direct struggle against Obama's education policies and the strike was ended after a few days in order to not disrupt his election campaign.

However, predictably, UFT President Michael Mulgrew asserted that the lesson of the Chicago strike was "Be sure to vote." The UFT has been in no rush to fight for a new contract although the last one expired more than three years ago, even though economic conditions make wage and benefit increases urgent.

The New York teachers union's stated strategy is to wait until Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a billionaire seeking to privatize the schools, reaches his term limit next year. The old contract gives Bloomberg the de facto wage freeze he desires, while the UFT's political focus is to maneuver among the Democratic Party candidates vying to replace him.

During the recent election campaign, the union concentrated its criticism on Bloomberg to avoid mentioning the miserable record of the Obama administration. The UFT posing as the defender of fair evaluation of teachers is a charade since the union agreed to the evaluation system. It supported Obama in both elections despite his policies of privatizing education through charter schools and requiring states to compete for federal funds by fulfilling his requirements on charters and testing evaluations through "Race to the Top."

The fight to defend teachers and revive public education is a political struggle. The alliance of the unions with the big business Democratic Party has proven a disaster. Teachers will have to turn in another direction, to a socialist program and the struggle against the profit system.



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