11,000 US teachers laid off in December

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Since the Department of Labor's monthly employment report was released last Friday, very little discussion in the media has been devoted to the fact that of the 13,000 local government workers that were laid off last month, more than 11,000 were teachers or school-related staff. Reuters reported that last month's firings have driven the number of workers employed by local government to their lowest levels since 2005.

Typically, a school will announce layoffs slated to go into effect at the end of a school year. That the firings have occurred in the middle of the year points to the fact that many districts, pressed for funds, simply have no choice but to let go of staff without warning.

"There is some expectation that state and local budgets will start to improve as the economy is picking up," said Jan Eberly, the US Treasury's assistant secretary on economic policy, about the findings. This echoes the refrain of the Obama administration, citing the barely 153,000 average jobs added per month in 2012 as a sign of an improving economy. It has been acknowledged, however, that at this pace, the level of employment will not reach pre-recession levels for nearly a decade.

In reality, the Obama administration has no intention to restore public sector jobs that have been eliminated since the onset of the recession in 2008. Public education has been a prime target of privatization and downsizing under the administration's Race to the Top program. Across the country, district managers have used questions of accountability and so-called efficiency in school districts to shred public education, with teachers bearing the brunt of this onslaught.

Alongside this is the outright elimination of public education in many school districts, with its replacement by privately contracted charters. A recent announcement by the Philadelphia public school district noted it was preparing to shutter as many as three dozen schools in the city. Such a move would effectively eliminate public education for many neighborhoods in the district. Washington, D.C., has an arrangement stating that any new public facilities that are opened in the district will be given to charter operators on a first come, first served basis.

The *Economix* blog of the *New York Times* recently noted that while the private sector has added roughly 725,000 workers since 2008, the public sector has *lost* a near-equivalent number at 697,000. This means that a shifting has occurred within the workforce, sending workers out of the public sector and into less-secure, lower-paying private sector jobs, if they happen to be rehired at all. Over that period, 300,000 of those lost public sector jobs belonged to teachers.

A National Employment Law Project study released last fall found that 60 percent of the jobs that the "economic recovery" has produced were low paying, having wages between $7.69 and $13.83 an hour. In contrast, medium-paying jobs, those that made up the majority lost during the recession, made up barely 22 percent of those that have returned since.

Local governments, starved of federal and state funding, have been compelled to carry out some of the most drastic budget cuts and layoffs. US Commerce Department data shows that local and state government spending contracted 11 of 12 months throughout last year, with only a slight uptick of 0.3 percent in December.

The elimination of public education has been a central aim of Obama's Race to the Top, an expansion on the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind. The program ties school funding to bogus "accountability" measures, singling out teachers with standardized test performance in order to label schools that fail to meet these requirements as underperforming, and thus designated to be shut down, making way for for-profit charter schools.

The teachers' unions have facilitated these attacks. In

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light of the latest round of layoffs, National Education Association (NEA) teachers' union president Dennis Van Roekel told Reuters that he remained "hopeful that President Obama and the 113th Congress, as well as governors, will prioritize our students and public education and work hard to stave off further cuts." The NEA was the first major union to endorse the president's re-election bid, when at the time Obama had already presided over 200,000 layoffs in the education sector.

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