Mass opposition to Philadelphia school closures

Our reporters
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Plans by the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to shut down three dozen public schools have provoked widespread opposition from workers and students. On Wednesday night, about 300 attended a public meeting organized by the city and held in one of the schools slated for closure, University City High School in West Philadelphia.

The effort by the city and school superintendent William Hite, Jr. to close nearly one in six schools in the district is part of plans for expanding charter operations and eventually privatizing the entire school system. The same policies are being carried out in city after city, and have been spearheaded by the Obama administration.

As in other cities where school closures have taken place, the school district in Philadelphia has organized a series of meetings that are open to the public, inviting Philadelphia residents to present reasons why their schools should remain open. The hearings are an empty public relations act, meant to allow parents and students to air their frustration before the city, run by Democratic Mayor Michael Nutter, continues with its agenda.

Hite has repeatedly insisted that money is the sole factor in his plan, citing the city's $1.1 billion deficit as well as supposed under-enrollment in inner city schools. "Resources are the main question here," said Hite.

Testimony from parents and teachers denounced the proposed school closing, citing high scores many schools have achieved. Many said the behavior of the city's officials were tantamount to "stealing" children's education. One student likened his fate to that of the American Indians, saying "like Native Americans," the administration was trying to "rip our communities out from underneath us."

The presence of individuals such as School Reform Committee (SRC) Chairman Pedro A. Ramos served to expose the official reasons for the closures. The SRC is a body responsible for the proliferation of charters within the Philadelphia school district. Last spring it was responsible for delivering a $139 million grant for the extension of charter school licenses within the Philadelphia city limits. (See, "Philadelphia to shut one out of every six schools")

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* and supporters of the SEP intervened throughout the meeting, distributing a leaflet "*No to school closures! Reject the Philadelphia school closure plan!*" Throughout the meeting, many speakers expressed illusions that the school board and city officials could be appealed to on the basis of morality or common sense. An SEP supporter who addressed the audience was met with loud applause upon explaining the irreconcilable class differences expressed in the school closures plan.

Drawing the connection between school closures across the country (including Washington, DC, Chicago and Los Angeles) to the attack on workers' wages, the speaker mentioned the struggle of New York City school bus drivers, who are currently striking to preserve their job security.

"This is a national policy of the ruling class," he said. The speaker called for audience members to join the SEP and to begin the formation of independent committees to wage a defense of public education. An attempt was made by mediators to cut the speaker off mid-sentence, which was denounced by members of the audience.

Many parents and youth spoke to the WSWS after the meeting.

One parent responded to Hite's claim that the closures were simply "moving things around." "This was a lie," she said, explaining that the teachers' supposed "right to follow" students was reliant on whether or not new facilities hired new teachers coming from other schools. In the case of University High School, which has many sponsorship programs that involve nearby colleges, these programs would likely be eliminated, as distance would

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now separate the students traveling to meet with high schoolers.

When asked why he thought schools were being eliminated, Chris, a University City alumni said that “it was to build more charters, to make the rich richer, to make sure their kids have the education.” A government worker added that, “everyone is looking for dollar signs. Every industry is cutting back, so why don’t you [Hite] cut back your salary?”

Diane, a service industry worker, spoke about the facilities that kids would be forced to move to in the event of a closure. “To take these kids out of their neighborhood schools and put them in older buildings that no one should be in, it’s unfair.” She added, “Say one school can take 80 students and another school can take 70. We have 300 kids in our school [set to be shut down.] Where are the rest of them going to go?”

Sharon, an after school programs volunteer, said she agreed with the SEP position on the closure of Philadelphia schools, saying that the party should be addressing conferences of parents and teachers in the Philadelphia area. She eagerly supported the call for a defense of the social rights of the working class, quoting The Declaration of Independence’s famous phrase “we hold these truths to be self-evident.”

One Philadelphia school teacher, when asked his opinion of the hearing, responded by saying, “The fix is in.” Upon being asked to elaborate he said that it was his opinion that the entire meeting was a spectacle, and that he suspected Hite of purposefully designating many schools for closure, so that upon reversing himself in a few cases, he could appear to be “a good guy.”

The teacher, who preferred to go unnamed, added, “The problem is, in this city, everyone is bought and paid for, we need an organization which won’t become corrupted.”

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