

The New York bus strike and the defense of public education

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Virtually ignored by the news media, an important struggle is currently being played out in New York City. Some 8,000 school bus workers are now in their fourth week of a strike against Mayor Michael Bloomberg's drive to eliminate their job security, part of efforts to drastically slash wages and benefits.

The conflict is something of a microcosm of American society as a whole. Bloomberg, who has a net worth of approximately \$25 billion, is demanding that workers who make \$35,000 a year in one of the world's most expensive cities accept a drastic decline in their living standards.

The workers themselves are aware of the fact that much broader issues are involved, going beyond the immediate issues at stake. Bloomberg is attempting to break the strike—with the assistance of the trade unions—as part of an attack on the working class as a whole.

In particular, for Bloomberg and the ruling class he speaks for, the bus workers must be defeated as part of an overall attack on public education. Teachers are facing relentless demands for give backs, and the city plans to close many more public schools. Already under his administration, 140 schools have been closed and many have been replaced by charter schools.

Bloomberg is playing a part in a nationwide campaign against public education, supported by both Democrats and Republicans. In state after state, city after city, teachers are being laid off by the thousands. Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia and Washington, DC—all overseen by Democratic Party mayors—are currently implementing plans for closing dozens of schools. In some cities, the privatization of whole districts is being actively discussed.

These policies are coordinated by the Obama administration, which from the beginning has

aggressively promoted charter schools and the victimization of teachers for the crisis of education. In their education policies, the Democrats and Republicans are virtually identical, and indeed Obama has overseen far more school closures and teacher layoffs than his predecessor.

What is taking place, in fact, is a conscious effort to undermine and ultimately dismantle the entire institution of public education. The concept that everyone should have access to this critical social right is being done away with. Whatever education system remains is to be ever more directly subordinated to various profit interests and the dictates of the ruling class as a whole.

This is an historic transformation. The institution of public education in the United States has roots that go back to the American Revolution over two centuries ago.

The leaders of the American Revolution saw the institution of public education as a central pillar of democracy, necessary for popular governance. When it was still a revolutionary force, the bourgeoisie saw it as a necessary counterweight to the British aristocracy and, later, the southern slavocracy.

“Establish & improve the law for educating the common people,” wrote Thomas Jefferson to a friend in 1786. “Let our countrymen know that the people alone can protect us against these evils [of tyranny and oppression] and that the tax which will be paid for this purpose is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance.” Benjamin Franklin helped create not only the American republic, but the first subscription library on the continent.

The slaveholders of the South were terrified of an

educated population, both slave and free. Reaction has always taken up the mantle of ignorance. On the other hand, the most outspoken abolitionists, such as Thaddeus Stevens, were known as much for their efforts to expand public education as for their hatred of slavery.

In the late 19th and into the 20th Century, the central social conflict in the United States shifted to that between the working class and the bourgeoisie. The expansion of public education became inextricably tied to mass working class struggles.

With the example of the Russian Revolution present to remind it of the threat of social revolution, the American ruling class responded to the growth of class conflict in part through the granting of concessions. The expansion of access to public education, including through the ending of segregation, was part of a policy of liberal reform, made possible by American capitalism's position as the dominant global economic power.

But the ruling class has repudiated all of these democratic traditions. Over the last four decades, it has been engaged in a systematic attempt to dismantle not only all the gains won by the working class over the course of decades, but also the entire heritage of the American Revolution and Civil War.

In its entire social being, the American ruling class—which has built vast fortunes on speculation, financial parasitism and fraud—is hostile to the democratic and egalitarian spirit that animates the concept of public education. It sees such institutions as intolerable drains on profit, relics of a past when not everything was subordinated to the direct enrichment of the ruling class.

The corporate and financial elite, along with its political representatives, proceed with a certain reckless abandon. It is tearing up its entire democratic tradition, and thereby whatever remains of its political legitimacy. The same administration that is presiding over the dismantling of public education asserts the right to assassinate American citizens without due process, casting aside with hardly a thought core constitutional principles going back centuries.

The preservation of public education is not compatible with the existence of the ruling class and the social system, capitalism, on which it stands. Nothing can be gained through appeals to the

Democrats or Republicans, both hardened defenders of this social order.

The defense of public education, like all other social and democratic rights, falls to the working class, the only truly progressive and revolutionary social force in society.

The only way to defend and extend public education is through a struggle to completely rebuild society on the basis of social equality. The power of the financial oligarchy must be broken, the banks and major corporations nationalized. Only through a socialist program, fought for by an independent party of the working class, can public education be defended and extended.



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