

Billionaires pour cash into campaign to dismantle public education in Los Angeles

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New York mayor Michael Bloomberg announced last week that he would spend more than a million dollars of his own money to place “pro-reform” candidates on the Los Angeles Unified School District board.

Bloomberg is endorsing a slate of candidates who are part of the Coalition for School Reform which has pledged itself to accelerating privatization efforts led by District Superintendent John Deasy.

The mayor’s contribution added to those of several other high-profile education “reformers.” Among them were Los Angeles billionaire Eli Broad, \$250,000, former Univision Head Jerry Perenchino, \$250,000, along with donations of more than \$50,000 each from Jamie Lynton, wife of Sony Pictures CEO Michael Lynton, March Nathanson, chairman of Mapleton Investments, Jeffrey Katzenberg, CEO of Dreamworks Animation, Andrew Hauptman, board member of BSN Sports, Casey Wasserman, grandson of Hollywood Studio Head Lew Wasserman, and Meg Chernin former wife of News Corp. CEO Rupert Murdoch.

This Wednesday, former Washington DC Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee announced that her Sacramento-based reform organization, StudentsFirst, would donate \$250,000 to the same Coalition for School Reform slate. Also lending his support is Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who called the billionaire mayor “the most important voice in education reform today.” This, after the mayor led the assault on thousands of New York City school bus drivers and assistants who struck for four weeks to defend a long-standing provision which ensures a safe and stable workforce to man city school buses.

All told, the Coalition for School Reform has garnered more than \$3 million in campaign contributions, a sum that dwarfs spending on any previous school board election. These contributions

indicate that preparations are well underway for a veritable blitzkrieg against public education in the nation’s second largest school district.

So complete is the dominance of the reactionary “pro-reform” forces over the school board that at least one candidate felt obliged to issue a groveling apology to the mayor for not appearing to be sufficiently committed to the cause. The following statement was made by District 4 board candidate Steve Zimmer’s open letter to the mayor:

“Perhaps I haven’t pleased everyone in my pursuit to make our students’ education a priority, and by eschewing politics to pursue education reform I’ve offended the extremes of the education debate. I would have assumed that to be something you of all people would respect rather than seek to punish. ... I’d like to invite you to walk my district with me so I can show you what we’ve accomplished. Since you have made such a large bet against me, I think it is only fair you give me the opportunity to make my case.”

Zimmer is supported by the United Teachers of Los Angeles and Associated Administrators of Los Angeles. The two unions have endorsed candidates not part of the Coalition for School Reform and posture as opponents of charter schools and privatization.

Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. The UTLA, in particular, runs its own charter schools, called pilots and has begun to accept dues from underpaid teachers at private charter schools beginning with the recent announcement that teachers at Ivy Academy would become members of the UTLA, accepting the charterization of public schools as an accomplished fact.

The individual candidates supported by the unions have supported school privatization as well. In addition to Zimmer, District 6 candidate Maria Cano had this to

say about charters: “I think we need to look at our charter schools’ record, and I think we need to focus on the purpose of public school education, and to endorse charters with more oversight than we have now.”

The pseudo-left has fully immersed itself into the school privatization movement with the unions’ endorsement of Robert Skeels, a member of the International Socialist Organization. Skeels has campaigned explicitly on the reactionary platform of identity politics and “social justice” trade unionism, insisting that the attack on public education is racially motivated and demanding that the district allocate funds to schools which serve historically oppressed ethnic minorities.

Such a “defense” of public education only aids the campaign for privatization.

The massive donations by Bloomberg and his ilk are the response of the financial elite to the emergence of working class opposition to the attack on public education. The ruling elite has reacted with alarm to opposition to charter schools emerging in districts across the country such as Los Angeles, Chicago and Philadelphia. Moreover, struggles of workers like the New York City school bus drivers, despite the efforts of the unions in containing and betraying it, threaten to take hold in the working class and spiral out of the control of the unions and the Democratic Party.



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