

Buffalo, New York students and teachers face attack

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Students and teachers in Buffalo, New York, are facing sharp cuts and school closings as part of the push by the new superintendent, Pamela Brown, to cut \$50 million from the budget. Brown is seeking to implement her “reform” plan, which aims to close public schools, fire teachers and expand charter schools.

On May 7, six of nine members of the Buffalo Board of Education were elected in a vote that involved only a small percentage of eligible voters. The newly comprised board, which will be seated in July, will have control of a \$900 million budget and greatly influence the district, which serves approximately 32,000 students in 59 schools.

Buffalo is the state’s second largest city; 26.6 percent of its residents live below the poverty line, 10.8 percent are officially unemployed, and the median household income is only \$24,536. The district in western New York has a large immigrant population, including refugees whose first language is not English and who tend to live in some of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. The graduation rate in the city’s schools is only about 50 percent.

Buffalo has already gone through massive cuts. Since 2002, 29 schools have been closed and teachers have worked without a contract for nearly 10 years. Teachers have not received any cost-of-living raises during this period.

At the start of the 2012-2013 school year, New York State Education Commissioner John King, Jr., deemed 28 of Buffalo’s 59 public schools to be among the state’s lowest performing. These schools have been designated “priority schools,” a euphemism created by the Obama administration to identify schools to be fast-tracked for closure or privatization. Another 16 schools in the district have been designated “persistently low-

achieving,” also termed “focus schools.” They are in line to become the next priority schools.

In 2012, Commissioner King appointed a “distinguished educator” to evaluate and make recommendations for improving the Buffalo schools. At the same time the *Buffalo News* reported, “New York State Regent Bob Bennett has been talking for at least two years about a state takeover of the district.” While state officials deny a state takeover is in the plans, the appointment of a “distinguished educator” is the first step in that process.

A closer look at King as well as those elected to the school board, both Democrats and Republicans, shows they have vested interests in attacking teachers and promoting charter schools. King is founder of the Roxbury Preparatory Charter School in Massachusetts, and former director of Uncommon Schools, a charter school start-up and management company, which operates over 30 charter schools, in Boston, Massachusetts, Newark, New Jersey, and several cities throughout New York state.

Well-funded groups seeking the dismantling of public education, extending as far as Albany and New York City, actively poured in money and manpower to promote the candidates they supported.

One of the candidates to win a seat is former New York gubernatorial Tea Party candidate, Carl Paladino, a multimillionaire real estate developer from Buffalo. Paladino, whose company leases buildings to several charter schools in the city, is a proponent of privatization and boarding schools for children in low-performing schools. He wants to go even further than Brown in eliminating tenure for teachers and supports a local version of a parent-trigger bill, which would allow parents to vote to turn public schools over to charter school organizations. His plans for negotiating a new

contract with the Buffalo Teachers Federation include tying any long-awaited pay increases to longer school days and years.

Jason McCarthy, an incumbent running for reelection, won a second term on the board. He raised substantial funds from Education Reform Now, an arm of Democrats for Education Reform, an organization that supports charter schools, vouchers, merit pay, and attacks on tenure. He also received funds from Students First NY, a chapter of a reform organization headed by former Washington, DC schools chancellor Michelle Rhee, who gained national notoriety for her anti-teacher measures. In addition, he raised money from the local business figures, Democratic Party officials, and Goldman-Sachs in New York City.

Another “reform” candidate to win a seat on the board is James M. Sampson, a charter school founder, president and CEO of Gateway-Longview, an agency that operates residential schools for troubled youth, and president of the board of directors of Buffalo ReformED. He received significant support from Students First NY, the Republican Party, and the local business executives, who described him as “‘the poster child’ of what [they are] ... looking for in a candidate.”

The situation faced by Buffalo students, teachers and parents is the same as that which confronts communities across the country and the world. Entire school districts face privatization and destruction at the hands of corporate reformers whose only concerns are profit and the availability of a cheap labor work force. The democratic ideal of universal access to education, championed by the revolutionaries who founded the United States, is incompatible with the profit system and the explosion of social inequality.

The right-wing forces that garnered seats in Buffalo and hundreds of other districts are not a reflection of popular support for their policies, which are deeply opposed by the majority of residents. It is an expression of the lack of any progressive alternative in these elections. The teachers unions offer no genuine opposition to privatization, and instead promote the Democratic Party because it generally uses the services of the unions to impose “school reform.”

The Obama administration is carrying out an all-out assault on public education in cities and states across the country, through reactionary programs such as Race to the Top, which force districts to compete for

desperately needed funds through the implementation of punitive testing regimes and attacks on teachers.



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