

The Chicago school closings and the way forward to defend public education

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The announcement by the Chicago Board of Education last week that 49 of the city's schools will be shut down in the largest school closing in US history marks a new stage in the American ruling class's offensive against public education.

Since taking office in 2009, the Obama administration has overseen the closing of nearly 4,000 schools and the elimination of the jobs of some 336,000 teachers and other school employees. Nearly 2,000 schools were closed in 2010-2011 alone, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

The Obama administration and Democratic Party officials like Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel are spearheading this attack under the guise of education "reform." This involves expanding the use of standardized tests to victimize teachers, replacing public schools with for-profit charter schools, and removing arts, history and literature classes to make way for a "Common Core" curriculum tailored to the needs of corporate America.

With the end of the school year rapidly approaching, hundreds of thousands of teachers around the country face anxious weeks and months waiting to find out whether they will be out of a job or forced to take devastating wage and benefit cuts.

The dire situation facing teachers occurs after a year in which thousands of teachers and other school employees, along with students and parents around the country, expressed their deep opposition to the attack on public education.

The Chicago school closures are the result of the defeat of September's strike of 26,000 teachers—one of the largest public school strikes in decades. The walkout was shut down by the Chicago Teachers Union, which forced through a concessions contract that met all of Mayor Emanuel's demands. This paved

the way for the current closures, adding to the nearly 100 Chicago schools shut down since 2001.

Chicago is not alone. In Washington, D.C., 15 schools are slated to be closed despite widespread outrage. There too, the Washington Teachers Union blocked any unified struggle against the Democratic Party by filing a lawsuit alleging the closings were "racist." The aim was to obscure the class issues while subordinating the working class to sections of the Democratic Party.

In Philadelphia, 26 schools—one out of ten—are going to be shuttered, without any opposition by the unions there.

In New York, almost 9,000 bus drivers and school transportation employees face a huge pay cut and layoffs after the Amalgamated Transit Union pushed through a concessions contract ending their month-long strike in February. The betrayal enabled the city's billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, to press ahead with plans for more school closings and a vast expansion of charter schools. The city has closed 117 public schools over the last decade.

In schools and classrooms throughout the country, there is seething anger and resentment over these conditions.

The feelings of hundreds of thousands of educators were eloquently expressed last week by Ellie Rubenstein, a veteran teacher from the Chicago suburb of Highland Park, who submitted her resignation in a speech on YouTube in which she denounced the attack on public education.

"I have become painfully aware that neither my principal, administrators, not even my union will protect my rights or stand by me," Rubenstein said. "There is no where to turn for support, and unless you are a yes man, you will soon find out that your only

choice is to become one or leave.”

It is entirely appropriate for Ms. Rubenstein, together with thousands of her fellow teachers, to conclude that the unions have done nothing and will do nothing to oppose the attack on public education. But her conclusion that there “is nowhere to turn for support,” was upended by the enormous response to her video—which has already received half a million views.

This points to a basic fact about contemporary society: working people, students and educators are opposed to the drive to dismantle public education. Struggles by educators to defend their jobs and wages receive, despite the best efforts of the media and unions to isolate them, overwhelming public support.

However, the attempt to defend education through the unions and the Democratic Party is impossible. The claims by the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association that a Democratic president would reverse the reactionary attacks of George Bush have been left in tatters, as Obama has gone even further than his Republican predecessor in attacking teachers and public education.

The destruction of public education is a bipartisan policy. Its source is the immense growth of social inequality and the rise of a corporate and financial elite that controls every lever of government. Drunk in their pursuit of ever-greater personal wealth, the ruling class is instinctively hostile to the egalitarian and democratic principles embodied in public education. Having concluded that they require a relatively small number of skilled and educated workers, they see public education largely as a waste of money and its looting as another source of profit.

Millions of educators, parents and students recognize the socially destructive and irrational character of this. But the first step in developing a counteroffensive to defend public education and secure the resources for its vast improvement and expansion is recognizing that this essential social and democratic right is incompatible with the capitalist profit system.

Teachers and all those who defend public education must turn to a socialist perspective.

This means breaking with the pro-capitalist unions and the Democratic Party and spearheading the fight to build a mass political movement of the working class. Capitalism must be replaced by socialism, that is, the organization of society on the basis of social need, not

private profit. To take up this fight, we urge you to study the program of the Socialist Equality Party and join and build our party.



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