

Newark, New Jersey principals victimized for opposing school closures

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On January 17, Cami Anderson, the Newark public schools superintendent appointed by New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, suspended five school principals, including four who spoke at a local community meeting to oppose the One Newark program, one of the most recent attempts to privatize public education in a major US city.

Under the One Newark plan, so called because students will be allowed to enroll in any school in their age group in the city, many public schools will be closed, and their students forced to attend schools in other locations, often at some distance from their homes. The empty school buildings will be filled by privately run, publicly funded charter schools.

Principals H. Grady James of Hawthorne Avenue School, Tony Motley of Bragaw Avenue School, Dorothy Handfield of Belmont Runyan School, and Deneen Washington of Maple Avenue School were all suspended for speaking in opposition to the plan at a meeting at the Hopewell Baptist Church on January 15. The meeting was organized by Democratic city councilman and mayoral hopeful Ras Baraka (son of the late poet and writer Amiri Baraka), who hopes to exploit opposition to the reorganization plan to further his own electoral ambitions.

After public outcry, four of the principals resumed their duties on Monday, and one, Deneen Washington, was told to report to the central office of the school district.

Newark has a population of just under 300,000 and is New Jersey's largest city. According to the latest statistics, approximately a third of Newark's residents lived at or below the federal poverty line.

The Newark public school system, with about 40,000 students and 3,000 teachers, has been in state receivership since 1995. The rights of teachers in

particular have been under sustained attack for several years. In 2012, the Newark Teachers Union signed an agreement—widely touted in the media as a “landmark deal”—with the state that implemented a merit pay system based on the determination of a teacher's classroom performance.

The contract eliminated the annual raises for experience, standard for decades in American public schools, and abolished automatic pay increases for those teachers who obtained advanced degrees. Since teachers who already had advanced degrees were allowed to opt out of the new system—and most did—the Newark public school system now effectively has a two-tier system of evaluation for teachers.

The Newark schools were the recipient of a \$100 million gift from billionaire Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg in 2010. Some of this money was used to found new charter schools, while much of the remainder was kept in a pool for teachers' merit pay.

Many teachers believed at the time that the standards for student performance are set so high that they have little hope of receiving any raise. In fact, only 5 percent of eligible teachers received a merit pay raise in 2013.

In addition to this degrading of teachers' rights, fully accommodated by the union, Cami Anderson laid off over 100 school employees last summer.

Anderson, a personal friend and political ally of former Newark mayor and current US Senator Cory Booker, a Democrat, is portrayed in the media as a “gutsy reformer” who is challenging the antiquated Newark educational system.

The truth is that the One Newark plan aims at transferring public wealth from the working population into private hands. This process has been going on at a national level with cities such as Detroit, New Orleans, Chicago, and New York at the forefront.

As elsewhere in the US, the domination of charters in Newark will allow for easy firing of teachers and the slashing of their pay, along with the subordination of education to standardized test scores and the labor demands of private corporations.

What distinguishes the situation in Newark—and sets a dangerous precedent—is the anti-democratic silencing of opposition by educators to the privatization plan.

Teachers and school workers spoke about the issue to the *World Socialist Web Site* at a recent public meeting on the suspension of the principals. They emphasized that they were under a gag order from school authorities and feared retribution if they commented publicly.

Patricia Fanego, a parent and retired teacher, said, “Cami Anderson gave principals the right to lay off whoever they wanted. That is why I left teaching, and I am lucky that I am on disability and getting a pension now.

“Now I am worried about my son. He has Asperger syndrome, which is just a form of autism. I am lucky that he is in the Oliver Street School and in a program that puts him in a normal class but with an assistant. If they change teachers, however, that could have a big effect on him.

“[Governor Chris] Christie is the one who gave Anderson her job. She knows nothing about education. Her goal is to drive out higher-paid teachers. They have already changed the tenure system, and now it takes five years to become tenured instead of three. So on the fourth year they consider changing teachers. I know they are going to try and buy out senior teachers to replace them.”

Ana Jordao, a mother with a student in the Newark school system, said, “Governor Christie is just bad news. He is just helping his friends. I was not a huge [Former Newark Mayor] Cory Booker fan, but I felt he was improving the city. Now that he is senator it is like he is just abandoning the city.”

A teacher with nine years in the Newark schools who did not want his name used for fear of victimization told the WSWS:

“My school was originally slated to phase out this coming September. We have a strong, active alumni association that helped halt that. We had been the number one school for students who went on to get PhD’s. We debunked the superintendent slating us to

close on the basis of lower enrollment and low student attendance.

“We have 85 percent attendance. There is low enrollment because [Anderson] closed the feeder schools to our school. Originally students in community schools came here, but now with the One Newark program and charter schools they can go anywhere in Newark.

“One Newark is trying to make it like New Orleans after Katrina when all the schools were made charter schools. Now when someone speaks out they get suspended. We have not seen this before, where you are afraid to speak out.

“Newark is 100 percent state operated, so is Camden, and half of Jersey City. They are selling city property, like a school donated by the Krueger brewing family, to charters. That school has written on the entrance, ‘You are entering the last bastion of democracy.’

“The five schools where they suspended the principals are all in the South Ward, the poorest area of Newark. We are in the East Ward, which has the highest income. But we are against One Newark and its charters. They want to segregate the population and put them in separate schools, leaving bi-lingual students by themselves.”



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