

Newark, New Jersey school official threatens to fire one third of district's teachers

Rory Dean, Sandy English
20 March 2014

Newark, New Jersey Public Schools Superintendent Cami Anderson, citing falling student enrollment as well as budget shortfalls, announced her intention to lay off 1,000 of the city's 3,200 teachers over the next three years.

Anderson has made a formal request to the New Jersey Department of Education to allow her to "make performance a key factor," as she explained in a recent letter to teachers, in determining which teachers she will fire. Under Anderson's plan, layoffs would first affect teachers who have been classified "ineffective," one of four performance ratings that were established when teacher tenure laws were effectively dismantled last year, with the approval of the teachers union. As a result, seniority protection would have a minor role in determining which teachers would lose their jobs.

The public school system in Newark, the state's largest city, has been in state receivership since 1995. Newark, like other impoverished cities in New Jersey—Camden, Jersey City and Paterson—has had its schools placed under state control based on the pretext that this would boost abysmal graduation rates and improve educational quality.

The population of Newark is just under 300,000, and approximately one-third of the city's residents live at or below the federal poverty line. Even by the generous standards set by the federal authorities, more than half of the city's people live in or close to poverty.

The proposed layoffs are part of Anderson's One Newark plan, which calls for the closing of public schools and the granting of school property for the use of privately owned, publicly funded charter schools. By some estimates the plan hopes to enroll 40 percent of Newark's 40,000 students in charter schools by 2017.

The Newark Teachers Union (NTU) and its parent organization, American Federation of Teachers (AFT), claim to represent the interests of the teachers and of public education, and to oppose Anderson's plans. AFT

President Randi Weingarten has written a letter to Chris Christie castigating Cami Anderson.

The record shows, however, that the NTU is neither interested in nor capable of defending teachers and students. The union has already played a central role in undermining teachers' seniority rights. The most recent contract between the union and the city eliminated annual raises for experience, standard for decades in American public schools, and abolished automatic pay increases for those teachers who obtained advanced degrees.

Far from opposing pro-business "school reform" AFT President Weingarten is appealing to the state's Republican governor to "work with the union" to impose these attacks.

Community opposition is growing to the plans to privatize schools and force public schools to compete for funding with charters. Last month Anderson outraged parents and teachers when she suspended four principals for speaking out against the plan for the expansion of charters and robbing public schools of badly needed space and resources.

There have been reports that some of the laid off Newark teachers will be replaced by lower-paid newcomers from the Teach for America (TFA) program. While the Newark Public Schools has denied that it plans to hire TFA teachers to replace veterans whom it has laid off, it would be in keeping with a national pattern of using TFA teachers to lower wages and teaching standards in schools nationally.

TFA teachers, most of whom are recent college graduates with little or no training, are regularly sent to some of the most impoverished school districts in the US, including districts in New Jersey such as Camden, Elizabeth, Orange, Passaic, Paterson and Trenton. TFA has been prominent in New York City's New Visions public schools, funded by the Gates Foundation.

The Gates Foundation and other billionaire

philanthropies have been in the forefront of the charter school movement, which seeks to pit younger against older teachers, public schools against the privately run charters, and public school parents against those whose children attend charters.

The Walton Family Foundation (founded by the billionaire owners of WalMart) is moving into the charter school field in New Jersey. The Foundation is quoted on Bob Braun's Ledger, the blog of veteran New Jersey reporter Bob Braun, as saying, "Due to the impact of Teach For America's corps members and alumni in the region, the Walton Family Foundation announced that they will support the recruitment, training and support of nearly 370 Newark area teachers over the next two years."

The suggestion that the young and inexperienced teachers from TFA can provide quality education to Newark's overwhelmingly poor and working class students is a bald-faced lie. The "ineffective" classification, which Anderson says will be the guide in carrying out layoffs, is simply a pretext to fire higher-paid educators and replace them with temporary teachers forced to work for lower wages and substantially reduced benefits. The National Education Policy Center reported earlier this year that over 50 percent of TFA teachers quit teaching after two years and 80 percent quit after three.

The privatization of education is the goal being pursued by Anderson and other education "reformers" throughout New Jersey. It is a part of a political program, championed by the Obama administration and shared by Republicans and Democrats, aimed at undermining and eventually destroying public education. Charter schools are designed to serve several related purposes. They aim to attract private investment in the expectation of becoming new profit centers sought by the super-rich. At the same time, they serve the political and ideological purpose of diverting attention from the massive budget cuts that are having a devastating impact on public schools.

The deepening neglect of public education then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and is used to argue for greater privatization. More and more of the shrinking public funding is given over to privately run institutions, while teachers, parents and whole working class communities are pitted against one another. The hedge fund billionaires and their media mouthpieces then emphasize the alleged distinctions between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, between those few lucky enough to get their children into schools funded by

the Waltons and other billionaires, and the majority left behind who are castigated as indifferent to their children's needs.

Newark illustrates the bipartisan nature of charter school privatization. Cami Anderson was appointed by Chris Christie, the Republican governor of New Jersey, but is an ally of Democrat Cory Booker, Newark's former Mayor and currently US Senator from New Jersey. Booker was one of the key proponents of charter schools in Newark. In 2012, the *Washington Post* noted that Booker spoke with Christie "at the national policy meeting of the American Federation for Children. The federation's board chair is Betsy DeVos, a key member of the DeVos family, which has spent millions to support efforts to promote vouchers and promote reforms that are furthering the privatization of public education."

Booker has in his relatively short career become the darling of the ruling establishment. His business-friendly policies and role as an allegedly "centrist" Democrat in the mold of Barack Obama were credited with supposedly great improvements in Newark and helped propel him into the Senate in Washington last year.

Recently, however, the New Jersey state audit found that Linda Watkins-Brashear, a Booker appointee and close friend who ran the Newark Watershed Conservation and Development Corporation, "wrote unauthorized payroll checks to herself" and "handed out no-bid contracts worth millions of dollars." The general counsel of the Corporation, another close Booker friend, made up to \$400,000 without a contract of any kind.

This is the social layer, the grasping upper middle class seeking fame and fortune by serving the interests of the super-rich while supposedly representing the public that is behind the push for charter schools and all the political attacks on the working class. Whether Democrat or Republican, black or white, they represent no one but the billionaires, and the fight to achieve a decent education for all begins with the struggle against the two parties of the plutocracy and all of their spokesmen.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact