

The Chicago Teachers Union's "opt-out" campaign and the defense of public education

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The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), with the support of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and other pseudo-left organizations, has been promoting an "opt out" campaign targeting the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). The campaign is a political fraud, aimed at channeling growing discontent among students, parents and teachers back behind the trade unions, the Democratic Party and the Obama administration, which is spearheading the attack on public education.

The campaign occurs in a definite political context. Since President Obama took office in 2009, public education and the nation's 3.3 million public school teachers have faced an unprecedented attack. Far from breaking with the policies of George Bush, Obama has escalated the assault, tying federal funding to the expanded use of standardized tests to victimize teachers, funneling more public money to charter schools and tailoring classroom instruction ever more directly to the needs of corporate America.

Tenure and job security for educators has become a thing of the past, as seen in the recent announcement by the superintendent of the Newark, New Jersey schools that she plans to fire one third of the district's teachers and replace them with inexperienced, low-wage instructors. Since taking office in January 2009, Obama has presided over the wiping out of more than 330,000 teacher and other public school employee jobs, the closure of an estimated 4,000 schools and the doubling of the number of students enrolled in charter schools.

In recent months, demonstrations, school walkouts and other forms of protest against these attacks have erupted in Cleveland, Ohio; Fairfax, Virginia; Durham, North Carolina; Trenton, New Jersey; Portland, Oregon and other cities. This follows a year when teachers, parents and students packed school board meetings to denounce the closing of more than 100 schools in Philadelphia, Washington, DC and Chicago. This is part of the growth of international opposition to the attack on public education, as seen in strikes last week by 300,000 teachers in the United Kingdom and 80,000 teachers in Chile.

The chief obstacle to developing a fight to defend education has been the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), both allied to the

Democratic Party and opposed to anything that disrupts their relations with this big business party. Since the beginning of this year alone, the AFT and NEA have intervened to block strikes in Portland, Oregon and St. Paul, Minnesota in order to prevent a confrontation with Democratic Party-controlled local and state governments.

The teachers unions have operated as partners of the worst enemies of public education, including billionaire Bill Gates, and have backed Obama's new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) scheme, which will guarantee even more profits to the technology, testing and textbook monopolies that want to dominate the half-trillion dollar "education market." (See, "What is the Common Core US education initiative").

The Obama administration has relied on the AFT and NEA for its transition from the hated Bush-era No Child Left Behind tests to its new Common Core-based "Smarter Balanced exams." The rollout, however, has been a disaster, with technical glitches in the new computer-based tests, confusion over new standards and a lack of preparation time for teachers before the new high-stakes tests begin. In New York State, the confusing myriad of exams led to falling test scores, prompting protests from teachers and parents and Governor Andrew Cuomo's decision to implement a two-year moratorium on making the new exam scores the basis for the promotion of students. At the same time, the Democratic governor insisted exams would remain the most significant part of "evaluating" teachers, i.e., firing them for "ineffectiveness."

With growing opposition from teachers to the CCSS, both the AFT and NEA have sought to distance themselves from the test-based teacher evaluations and posture as opponents of "corporate reform." AFT President Randi Weingarten has called for a "moratorium" on high-stakes tests, and earlier this month she announced the union's Innovation Fund would no longer take money from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The AFT, which received a five-year \$4.4 million grant from Gates to support "teacher development" and the implementation of CCSS, will continue to take the billionaire's money for non-Innovation Fund operations and will raise dues to make up the difference.

Far from opposing these anti-working class organizations, the "opt" out campaign of the AFT-affiliated CTU is aimed at

preventing teachers and other sections of the working class from breaking with them.

With utter cynicism, the protest targeted a meaningless Bush-era Illinois Standards Achievement Test which is being phased out this year in favor of a new CCSS-based standardized test, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC).

CTU leaders struck a defiant pose against threats by school officials to victimize individual teachers who urged parents to “opt-out” of the tests. CTU President Karen Lewis declared, however, “There are no stakes attached. It’s not used for teacher evaluation...Forcing people to give the ISAT is as ridiculous as anti-miscegenation laws in the ‘50s and ‘60s in this United States.” CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization, reassured everyone that the state was “junking [the test] next year,” and noted that even Education Secretary Arne Duncan was largely ignoring the requirements of No Child Left Behind.

The CTU opposition to test-based teacher evaluations is entirely fraudulent. The Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), which runs the union and includes members of various ex-left groups like the ISO, Solidarity and the Party of Socialism and Liberation was intimately involved in drafting Senate Bill 7 with Illinois Democrats in late 2010 through 2011. Among other things, SB 7 made teacher performance ratings, already tied to standardized testing, the key to layoffs and firing procedures in preparation for a major reduction in public schools and teaching jobs in the city.

Much of the opposition by 26,000 Chicago teachers who walked out on strike in 2012 was focused on Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s demands for an expanded use of standardized testing to discipline and fire teachers, close schools and open charters. When the potential existed to develop a powerful political fight against the victimization of teachers, and more broadly against Obama’s attack on public education, the CTU quickly called off the struggle.

The sellout agreement signed by the CTU agreed to Emanuel’s demands for raising the test score portion of teacher evaluations. It also allowed the firing of tenured teachers after a year of such evaluations and non-tenured teachers immediately. The CTU then worked to “ease the transition” as the Democratic mayor shut down a record fifty schools and laid off 3,000 teachers. In return, a CTU-affiliate was awarded the opportunity to “organize” the city’s largest charter school operation—owned by a close associate of Emanuel—and collect union dues from 500 teachers and school employees. Sarah Chambers, a member of the CTU executive committee and bargaining committee that sold out the 2012 strike, led the testing boycott at Saucedo.

On a national level, the so-called opt-out campaign has been promoted by a host of liberal organizations, including Change the Stakes, Time Out From Testing and others, which are closely tied to the Democratic Party and generally sympathetic

to the teacher unions. Although the campaign has involved a very small number of parents and students, it has been widely publicized by the *New York Times* (which called it a “revolution”), the *Washington Post* and other major news outlets.

While seeking to tap into resentment over testing-based evaluation schemes, the aim of those behind this campaign is to contain opposition within the Democratic Party and the unions. It has been championed by the ISO and a section of the trade union apparatus precisely to block teachers, parents and students from drawing political conclusions from the five years of ruthless attacks on public education spearheaded by Obama and the Democrats, attacks that have been aided and abetted by the trade unions.

That this assault has gone on unabated, whether a Democrat or Republican controls the White House, the state capitols or the mayors’ offices, underscores the fact that the destruction of public education has the support of the entire corporate-controlled political establishment.

The right to a high-quality public education for all youth, regardless of their socioeconomic background, is not possible within a society so dominated by economic inequality. The American ruling elite has repudiated the egalitarian and democratic conceptions that animated the early champions of public education and is determined to return to the days when only the sons and daughters of the most affluent had access to knowledge and culture.

Education is being destroyed, along with every other social and democratic right won by the working class over a century of struggle, so the super-rich can accumulate even more personal wealth. That is why public education cannot be defended, let alone vastly improved, without a political struggle to break the dictatorial hold over society by the financial aristocracy and carry out a radical redistribution of wealth to meet society’s needs. This is the only way the resources can be marshaled to eradicate poverty and raise the cultural level of the entire population.

This can be achieved, however, only if the working class organizes itself as an independent political force, in opposition to the Democratic Party and the unions, along with their auxiliary organizations like the ISO. What is needed is a political movement that is explicitly for the socialist reorganization of economic and political life. Teachers, who will play a critical role in this fight, should study the history and program of the Socialist Equality Party and join the fight to build a new revolutionary leadership of the working class.

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