Governor Cuomo spearheads attack on New York City public schools

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The political maneuvers surrounding the recent New York State budget deal provide a revealing look at the real role of the charter school movement and the nature of the Democratic Party.

The deal concluded late last month in Albany under Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo gave New York City charter schools unprecedented power and influence. State legislative action essentially gave legal backing for the entrenchment of a two-tier educational system that will further undermine the city's public schools.

When Bill de Blasio won the New York City mayoral election last year, a prominent part of his platform was opposition to the unregulated growth of charter schools. These privately run but publicly financed schools, now numbering 183, accounting for about 6 percent of the student population in New York, may rise to as much as 10 percent by 2017. They are not obligated to take all students, they kick out many who need special assistance and who bring down their average test scores, and they make their own hiring decisions and their own rules.

Parents, teachers and students throughout the city have become increasingly angered by the charter schools' practice of "co-location," whereby these schools, which also receive financing from Wall Street billionaires, are inserted into buildings housing existing schools. As Diane Ravitch, a former US assistant secretary of education who has become a sharp critic of charter schools, put it in a recent column in the *New York Review of Books*:

"The host public school is often forced to give up its art room, its dance room, its computer room, every room used for any purpose other than classroom instruction, to make way for the unwelcome newcomer. The co-located schools must negotiate over access to the library, the auditorium, the playground. Co-locations cause overcrowding, as well as a competition for space and resources among students and multiple administrators within a single building."

De Blasio capitalized, as part of his campaign rhetoric about New York having become "a tale of two cities," on the widespread opposition to charter schools. He spoke of charging rent for charters, which have additional resources but nevertheless demand the use of public space.

As a capitalist politician, the candidate never spoke out in principle against the way in which charters are used to compete with and undermine the public schools. He could not and would not advance a program to provide a decent quality education for all. Instead he spoke only of slowing the growth of charter schools.

De Blasio coupled his limited criticisms of charters with the call for universal pre-kindergarten education, which he said he would fund through a minimal tax increase on those with incomes greater than $500,000 annually. Universal pre-K was presented, in an exaggerated fashion, as the key to reducing inequality, and became the centerpiece of de Blasio's campaign.

Addressing the issue of inequality and its impact on education, de Blasio received 70 percent of the vote last November. The end result of the Albany budget process, however, turned the new mayor's supposed campaign against inequality on its head. Working people who thought they were voting to demand more support for public schools have been handed the opposite.

The budget rejects the idea of even a tiny tax increase on the wealthy, an increase that requires state approval. Instead Cuomo provides $300 million for pre-kindergarten education in the city out of state funds, but this sum, itself inadequate, will also require regular future appropriations. This means that the public school system must go hat in hand each year to an openly indifferent if not hostile state legislature.

Furthermore, in return for the limited funding of pre-kindergarten, the state budget forbids the city to charge rent to charter schools. Instead it mandates that room be found for charters in public buildings, or that the city provide funds for the charters to rent private space.

The media is portraying the legislative success of the charter school advocates as the result of Cuomo "outmaneuvering" de Blasio. As some recent reports acknowledge, however, this has little or nothing to do with what took place.

Both de Blasio and Cuomo are in the final analysis representatives of Wall Street. The plutocrats felt the need, however, to discipline the new mayor, to quickly demonstrate that the real power lies with them and not with the voters, not even the voters who choose between two big business

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candidates.

The mayor approved 14 out of 17 charter school proposals, but for the most fanatical enemies of the public school system this was not enough. A lobbying effort backed by Wall Street spent $5 million on television ads depicting de Blasio as the heartless opponent of poor schoolchildren and their parents. The main public voice of the charter schools was Eva Moskowitz, the CEO of Success Academy Charter Schools and a former Democratic New York City Council member, who is notorious for her demagogic attacks on the public schools and her demonization of the city's teachers.

As the advertising campaign was reported to be taking its toll on de Blasio's poll ratings, the political maneuvers culminated in two dueling rallies near the State Capitol in Albany in late February. Moskowitz, whose charter school network enrolls a grand total of less than 7,000 students and who is paid $485,000 annually—more than double the pay of the city's public schools chancellor—closed her schools and put thousands of students and parents on buses for the 150-mile trip from New York City, using thousands of dollars donated by her billionaire backers.

While de Blasio spoke to a smaller group of supporters of pre-kindergarten programs, Governor Andrew Cuomo "spontaneously" appeared at the larger charter school rally. "You are not alone," he declared. "We will save charter schools."

As a much later article in the *New York Times* revealed, it is doubtful that Cuomo's appearance at the rally was unscripted. Weeks earlier, he had met with charter school leaders in his private conference room to offer them his full support. As the *Times* reports, Cuomo "instructed charter advocates to organize a large rally in Albany."

But this was not simply a clever maneuver thought up by the governor. Behind his self-confidence, and indeed the media's anointing of him as a political superman, is the backing of New York's ruling elite, the same elements who helped to bring about the 2008 financial crash, who paid no price for their criminality, and who have since more than recovered their own financial assets.

Cuomo's successful reelection campaign last year was bankrolled by the biggest backers of charter schools—hedge fund moguls like William Ackman, Carl Icahn, Bruce Kovner and Kenneth Langone, a founder of Home Depot—billionaires all.

The billionaires' motives are very clear. They include both the privatization of education and virtually all public services, turning them into new sources of profit for Wall Street investors. There is also the drive to divide the working class—in this case not primarily on racial lines, but rather through the bribing of a small section of workers who seek a decent education for their children, and are persuaded that they can only get it by trampling on the needs of the great majority.

Cuomo is the plutocrats' favorite, but that is not all. De Blasio's reaction to the Albany budget outcome is equally important. This supposed critic of charter schools used a recent speech to plead for mercy. As Diane Ravitch explained, he has changed his tune in a few months, and is now calling for an era "in which our charter schools help to uplift our traditional schools." This and similar moves, including the mayor's calls to some of the Wall Street billionaires to beg their forgiveness, were no doubt encouraged by former president Bill Clinton, who phoned de Blasio to offer his advice, according to the *Times*.

Cuomo learned the realities of capitalist politics at his father's knee. Mario Cuomo, also in his prime a governor of New York State, was famous for his lofty liberal keynote speech at the 1984 Democratic Convention. In the next two presidential elections, he wavered very publicly on whether to seek the presidential nomination, and his decision to bow out clearly reflected the fact that his liberal image no longer went over well with the billionaires who bankroll both parties and all candidates.

Andrew Cuomo has fashioned a career built on the lessons of his father's experience. This reflects the political trajectory of the American ruling class and the deepening crisis of American capitalism, which has long since abandoned any hint of social reform.

Many workers already understand or sense the futility of choosing between the candidates of the two major capitalist parties. Those who voted for de Blasio in the hope of a change from the administration of Michael Bloomberg are quickly being disabused of these illusions. On the issues of schools, hospitals, jobs, or poverty, not even the smallest improvement is possible without a complete class break with the parties of big business.

This also means a break with the unions, who are full partners in the Democratic Party, especially in the de Blasio administration. American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten and New York City's United Federation of Teachers chief Michael Mulgrew have both collaborated with the drive for charter schools, only asking, just like de Blasio, for "moderation" in the push for charters.

The defense of education, health care, jobs and living standards requires a class break with the party of both Cuomo and de Blasio, and the building of a new leadership of the working class based on a socialist program.

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