

Seeking to regain credibility, US teachers unions criticize Obama's education secretary

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After spending the last five-and-a-half years collaborating with the Obama administration's attack on teachers' jobs and conditions, the two teachers' unions in the US recently passed resolutions seeking to distance themselves from Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and his anti-public education policies.

The National Education Association (NEA) passed a resolution at its national convention in Denver, Colorado, on July 4, calling for Duncan's resignation, saying he had championed a "failed education agenda" consisting of policies that "undermine public schools and colleges, the teaching education professionals, and education unions."

This was followed by a July 13 resolution at the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) conference in Los Angeles, California, which called on President Obama "to implement a secretary improvement plan" for Duncan, modeled on the punitive testing measures used to fire "failing" teachers. "If Secretary Duncan does not improve, and given that he has been treated fairly and his due process rights have been upheld, the secretary of education must resign," the statement read.

The conventions were held just weeks after Duncan's enthusiastic support for the Supreme Court's ruling in the Vergara v. California case, which attacks tenure and another job protections won by teachers over decades of struggle. At the time Duncan hailed the right-wing forces behind the lawsuit, saying, "millions of young people in America" are "disadvantaged by laws, practices, and systems that fail to identify and support our best teachers and match them with our neediest students."

The NEA and AFT resolutions, however, were nothing more than an exercise in damage control by the unions, aimed at reviving the credibility of both unions, which have been undermined by their collaboration with Duncan and the administration's pro-corporate "school reform" agenda. The resolutions will have no affect whatsoever on the continued collaboration of the teachers' unions with the Obama administration.

In fact, the day the NEA convention passed its resolution, officials from the rival AFT were at the White House meeting with Duncan to collaborate on the implementation of a new "teacher equity plan," another teachers "evaluation" plan to rid poor school districts, with the assistance of the unions, of

higher paid, more senior teachers.

Duncan dismissed the NEA resolution with the contempt it deserves, saying, had NEA officials not been at their convention, "I think they would have stood with us on this" today, too. He congratulated new NEA President-elect Lily Eskelsen Garcia and added, "We've had a very good working relationship with the NEA in the past."

In addition to concealing their own role, by presenting Duncan as the author of this anti-teacher agenda, the unions are seeking to protect President Obama and the Democratic Party. The teachers unions promoted the lie that Obama would reverse the attacks of his Republican predecessor. In fact, the Democratic president has gone well beyond the attacks associated with Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001.

Under Obama's Race to the Top (RTTT) the administration allocated \$4.35 billion to fund a "competition" designed by the Bill & Melinda Gates, Eli Broad, Boeing, Walton Family and other Foundations. School districts were forced to vie against each other for funds already severely reduced under Bush's NCLB—federal funds that under the War on Poverty reforms of the 1960s were allotted directly to districts serving high percentages of students in poverty.

Under RTTT "winning" districts are those who agree to fire teachers and close or privatize schools based on poor standardized test scores, which are chiefly the result of poverty and decades of budget cutting, not bad teachers. Since the implementation of RTTT, public schools have been starved of funding, 330,000 teachers and other public school employees have lost their jobs, at least 4,000 public schools have been closed, and the number of students enrolled in charter schools has doubled.

Obama and the Democratic Party have embraced the anti-teacher nostrums long associated with the most right-wing sections of the Republican Party. This is underscored by the fact that former White House press secretary Robert Gibbs and several other former Obama aides are spearheading a national public relations drive to support lawsuits in New York and other states, modeled on Vergara, to overturn teacher tenure, seniority and other job protections.

On the local level, Democratic mayors and school officials

from Chicago, Philadelphia and New York to Detroit, New Orleans and Washington, DC, have spearheaded the attack on public education and expansion of for-profit charters.

The well-heeled executives who run the teachers' unions—including AFT President Randi Weingarten and NEA President Dennis Van Roekel who received salaries of \$543,150 and \$306,286 respectively in the last year alone—are not opposed to the pro-corporate school “reform.” On the contrary, they are only looking to be partners in this process, as the AFT slogan, “School reform with us, not against us,” makes clear.

Both the NEA and the AFT were direct recipients of Gates' money for the implementation of the so-called Common Core curriculum, which will be used to further attack teachers, while subordinating public education to the needs of profit-making technology and publishing companies. In 2012, the AFT accepted \$4.4 million in order to “work on teacher development and Common Core Standards.” In July 2013 the NEA endorsed the Common Core and was awarded \$6.3 million to assist with developing the Common Core Curriculum.

As teachers became wise to the character of Common Core, and every more disdainful of the AFT's support of it, AFT officials tried to distance themselves from Gates last March by refusing to take any additional money from the Gates Innovation Foundation Fund, only one of several conduits of the billionaire's money to the AFT.

Part of the grandstanding against Duncan is the increasing turf war between the AFT and NEA and their competition for dues money among a shrinking number of teachers. The AFT convention passed a dues increase by 45 cents per month this year and 55 cents per month next year, for a total monthly dues bill of \$18.78 for each member by September 2015—largely to offset the loss of Gates money—and is increasingly seeking to get a foothold among low-paid charter teachers, as well as non-teaching members like nurses.

The NEA, the nation's largest union, with just over three million members, including teachers, paraprofessionals and higher education instructors, has seen a significant drop in membership. Since the 2010-2011 school year, which coincides with the recession and the election of Obama, union membership for the NEA is down by 201,000 of its teacher members.

Under conditions in which more states are enacting Republican-backed “right-to-work” laws, which end automatic dues deduction from teachers' paychecks, and sections of the Democratic Party are openly discussing dispensing with the services of the unions altogether, the AFT and NEA are doubling down to ensure state and local officials that they can be relied on to slash costs, destroy teachers' conditions and suppress opposition to the closing of schools and the attack on education.

Over the last five years there have been growing struggles of

teachers—in Wisconsin, Chicago, Portland, Oregon, St. Paul, Minnesota, and other cities—which have led to a direct clash between teachers on the one hand and the Democratic Party and their servants in the trade unions on the other.

Well aware of the growing anger of rank-and-file teachers, a section of trade union bureaucracy and its supporters in pseudo-left movements like the International Socialist Organization, whose supporters have gained union positions in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City and other districts, are doing everything they can to refurbish the image of the teachers' unions.

Their model of “social justice unionism” has proven to be a dead end as the betrayal of the 2012 teachers strike, by Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis and Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a supporter of the ISO, showed. The CTU shut down the nine-day strike by 26,000 Chicago teachers before it could develop into a direct political confrontation with Mayor Rahm Emanuel—Obama's former White House Chief of Staff—and the White House.

This betrayal gave Emanuel the green light to close 50 schools and lay off 3,500 teachers and school workers. As a reward, an AFT-affiliated union was given the franchise to “organize” low-paid teachers at the Chicago United Neighborhood Organization (UNO) charter schools run by one of Emanuel's closest supporters.

Lewis and the CTU are now promoting the idea of running “independent” political campaigns in Chicago. Far from challenging the Democratic Party and advancing any independent political strategy for the working class, these campaigns fully accept the domination of society by the corporate and financial elite and are solely aimed at pressuring the Democrats to more effectively use the unions as partners in the dismantling of public education.

The way forward for teachers requires a complete break with the pro-corporate trade unions and Democratic Party and the fight to mobilize the working class as a whole against the profit system and to defend all of the democratic and social rights of the working class, including access to high quality public education.



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