

# Public education under attack in Buffalo, New York

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Just weeks before the start of the school year, 63 Buffalo public school teachers received layoff notices. This is just the latest in a series of attacks on Buffalo public school students and teachers, who have faced years of school closures, privatizations, layoffs, and a severe lack of resources in schools serving the city's highest-need students.

The district claims that fewer teachers are needed after the recent merger of two schools and the elimination of a ninth grade class in an area high school. However, many of the city's schools have overcrowded classrooms as well as large numbers of English language learners and special needs students. Many teachers and parents believe that cutting teaching staff will exacerbate the crisis in the schools serving the district's highest-needs students.

Buffalo teachers have worked without a contract for over 10 years and have not received a cost-of-living raise during this time. Teachers began picketing last week to raise public awareness of this, but also to alert the public, especially parents, of the dire issues that they and their students face as they begin the new school year.

In addition to overcrowding and a lack of classroom resources, teachers cite other problems including a lack of guidance counselors, social workers and attendance teachers, desperately needed to work with students dealing with the effects of poverty and high rates of student absenteeism, which has a profound effect on students' academic success.

There is also insufficient professional development offered for teaching the large number of English language learners in the district, which include immigrants and refugees speaking over 40 different languages.

A 2013 *Buffalo News* report revealed, "data and

analysis point to the placement of students with the highest special needs, the most language barriers and the greatest dropout indicators in six high schools which the district has labeled as 'failing schools.'" These students are "barred from attending higher performing schools, which have...admission requirements." One parent-activist complained that the district was segregating students based on academic performance, and compared placement policies to a "caste system."

Buffalo is one of the most segregated and economically unequal cities in the US. In 2008, the United Nations issued a report, "State of the World's Cities," that cited the Buffalo-Niagara Falls region as having one of the highest rates of economic inequality in the world. In addition, US Census data lists Buffalo in the top 10 of the most racially segregated cities.

With the population of Buffalo at just over 260,000, approximately 50 percent of Hispanics live below the federal poverty level, as do 39 percent of blacks, and 15 percent of whites. In absolute numbers, this equals nearly 40,000 blacks, 24,000 whites, and 10,000 Hispanics, comprising just under one-third of the total population.

Like other "rust belt" cities, former industrial centers in the Northeastern and Midwestern US, where factories have closed, and where populations and household incomes have drastically declined, Buffalo has seen its population fall to less than half of what it was at its height in the 1950s. Buffalo was an important steel and car manufacturing city, as well as a critical Great Lakes port linked to the Eastern seaboard by the Erie Canal and a complex railroad network.

The city was displaced as a major port city when Great Lakes shipping was rerouted through the newly-constructed Saint Lawrence Seaway in 1959.

Thousands of workers in the shipping and grain industries lost their jobs. Later, the closure of Bethlehem Steel and other heavy industries resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of other good-paying jobs, leading to high unemployment, loss of income, and a large decline in the population.

These jobs have been replaced by a relatively small number of good-paying jobs in the high-tech and medical industries, while the majority of jobs created are in the low-wage service sector and the region's burgeoning debt collection industry.

Although the unemployment rate in Buffalo is officially 8.2 percent, this masks the number of low-paying, part-time positions that comprise the majority of jobs, as well as the number of people who have become discouraged and given up looking for work altogether. According to statistics available on City-Data.com, in 2009, 65 percent of Buffalo residents living in poverty were unemployed.

Last year, the National Center for Children Living in Poverty released a damning report on childhood poverty in 25 US cities with populations over 250,000. Buffalo came in third with 46.8 percent of children living in poverty, just behind Detroit (57.3 percent) and Cleveland (53.9 percent). Among the school-aged population of 5-17 year olds, the rate is nearly 39 percent.

The Children's Defense Fund states that children in poverty have more health problems than their economically better-off peers, and that they lag behind in emotional and intellectual development. They are also less likely to consistently attend school and graduate from high school.

A great deal of research in recent years, including that conducted by Michael Rebell and Jessica Wolff of the Campaign for Educational Equity at Teachers College, Columbia University, has found that "there is no general education crisis in the United States. There is a child poverty crisis that is impacting education."

Like other cities across the US, Buffalo has been targeted by investors and other groups seeking to privatize public education as a profit-making scheme, as well as to strip away the last vestiges of democratic rights from the working class. Since 2002, 30 public schools have closed in Buffalo, many reopening as charter schools, often to close again several years later. New York City-based Goldman Sachs was one of many

corporate contributors to school board election campaigns in recent years.

The Buffalo Teachers Federation (BTF) offers no way forward for teachers, students, or families fighting for access to a quality education in Buffalo. The Democratic Party-affiliated organization is dedicated, like its parent organizations the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), to safeguarding capitalism and preserving the privileged positions of those in the union apparatus, who have become junior partners of the Obama Administration in the dismantling and plundering of public education.

The unions alienate their members by carrying out isolated and empty protests, such as the one currently taking place in Buffalo which involved picketing two mornings during the first week of school for a half-hour, on days that students were not in attendance, and then once a week thereafter just before school board meetings.

Meanwhile, the BTF did nothing to stop the district from contracting with Teach for America (TFA) in December 2013, to bring in 60 TFA "teachers" to work in the Buffalo schools beginning this fall. Teach for America puts new college graduates into classrooms with no pedagogical education or preparation, other than a five-week summer training session to work three-year contracts. The BTF only wanted to ensure that they would be paying union dues.

In order to fight for the preservation of public education teachers, students, and parents must break from the unions and the Democratic Party, and join with their counterparts across the US and internationally. The systematic privatization of education carried out under the auspices of education "reform" is part of the policy of social counterrevolution being carried out by the Obama administration on behalf of the ruling elite. The skyrocketing level of social inequality can only be reversed through the struggle of the working class against capitalism.



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