

The social counterrevolution in New Orleans schools

Recovery School District fires 84 percent of staff

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Last May, the Recovery School District (RSD) in New Orleans closed its last remaining public schools, becoming the first all-charter school system in the United States.

RSD is a school district administered by the statewide Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, founded in 2003 by the Louisiana state legislature for the explicit purpose of converting “failing” public schools into privately run charters. Although it oversees schools throughout the state (all of which are also charter), the vast majority of its schools are in New Orleans, where it took over most of the city’s schools from the existing Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Although the closure of RSD’s last five public schools was a *cause celebre* in the national media, it was only last week that a brief article by the *Times-Picayune* newspaper announced that RSD had fired 84 percent of its staff during the summer, from an already tiny 562 down to 92. The vast majority of RSD’s remaining funding is earmarked for construction and repair of school buildings, which are then turned over to charter operators. The district’s operating budget, which does not include funding for construction, has fallen by over 90 percent in just two years, from \$300 million to just under \$20 million for the current school year.

The Recovery School District, for all intents and purposes, has thus been reduced to a mere regulatory agency for the charter school industry in Louisiana. One of its chief remaining functions in New Orleans, for example, is contracting with outside vendors to produce a common application system (known as OneApp) for all of the city’s charter schools.

OPSB, now reduced to a rump controlling only 20 schools, of which all but six are charters, recently passed its own budget for the 2014-2015 school year. Although they officially control a budget of \$345 million, the board controls only a small minority of those funds; \$138 million goes straight to charter schools administered by RSD, for which the board essentially acts as a tax collection agency, and \$92 million go to OPSB’s own 14 charter schools. Another \$30 million goes straight into the coffers of the financial industry in the form of debt service. While news of mass layoffs in the school district remained under wraps in the media until after the start of the fall semester, the news of RSD’s complete charterization was the occasion for an explosion of triumphalism in the bourgeois media. “Experts” flocked to the editorial pages to declaim the “success” of the charter school experiment in New Orleans.

Typical was an article published last month in the *Huffington Post* by Scott Cowen, former president of Tulane University in New Orleans and founder of the university’s Cowen Institute, a pro-charter policy think tank.

“Hurricane Katrina, in one of its many ironies, created the opportunity for genuine reform by wiping out a dysfunctional and corrupt school system,” Cowen tells his readers. “The notable success of charters in New Orleans, alongside a handful of traditional schools, signals a healthy oxygenation and ferment, derived from competing ideas and the commitment of passionate educators.”

Thus Cowen, like American capitalism as a whole, saw in the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina (as well as by the government response) an

unprecedented opportunity to implement right-wing, pro-business policies. This project was supported by the entire political establishment, from the local to federal level.

In education, pro-charter plans that were already well advanced were put into motion immediately. Within weeks of the storm, OPSB fired 7,500 teachers and staff, flagrantly violating the terms of their collective bargaining agreements and virtually wiping out the teachers union, United Teachers of New Orleans, which had once been the largest union in the state. The decision was justified at the time by the financial emergency supposedly created by the storm. Today, the public education system in New Orleans is almost entirely nonunionized, with many charter schools hiring woefully unqualified college graduates from the Teach for America program.

After Katrina, the state legislature passed legislation to position RSD, which had been founded two years earlier, to take over the vast majority of New Orleans public schools. Act 35, passed in extraordinary session in late 2005, changed the definition of a “failing school” for the purposes of RSD to merely being below the state average on standardized test scores. This is the standard used by Cowen in his article when he declares that 65 percent of New Orleans schools were “failing” before Katrina.

Cowen’s support for charter schools mirrors his policy towards his own university. After Katrina, whole programs at Tulane, including the entire Engineering Department, were eliminated and faculty were either fired or had their salaries slashed. At Tulane, as in the New Orleans public schools, an alleged imminent fiscal emergency was cited as the excuse for this attack on education.

Today, tuition at Tulane has skyrocketed to among the highest in the country, despite an endowment of over \$1 billion, with total annual charges reaching nearly \$59,000 for the 2014-2015 school year. The programs eliminated after Katrina have not been reinstated. The university newspaper the *Hullabaloo*, itself reduced to a mere 8 pages per week, reported in August that professor salaries at Tulane were the lowest among its peer institutions. However, the university has found \$75 million to build a new football stadium.

Contrary to rosy reports of charter “successes” in the media, there is a deep-seated anger developing among

working class parents and youth over the privatization of education in the city. Children in charter schools are subject to heavy-handed, prison-style discipline.

Last winter, students from Carver Collegiate and Carver Prep high schools in New Orleans East organized a walkout in protest over their treatment by the charter administration. Two-thirds of the student body in those schools, which share the same facilities, were suspended at least once during the previous school year, almost all for arbitrary infractions such as failing to smile when greeting their teachers or for failing to walk on a line of colored tape running down the school hallways.

Explaining their reasons for the walkout in an open letter, the students wrote, “The teachers and administrators tell us this is because they are preparing us for college. But walking on tape doesn’t prepare us for college. It trains us for the military, or worse, for jail.”



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