

Los Angeles schools superintendent backs “parent trigger” privatization scheme

Adam Mclean, Marc Wells

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The interim superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), Ramon Cortines, announced last week that the “parent trigger” law can be applied this year, reversing a temporary block on the procedure put in place by his predecessor, John Deasy.

California’s “parent trigger” is a law that allows the conversion of public schools into private charter schools if at least 51 percent of the parents at a school sign a petition to do so. Its largest proponent, a lobby group called Parent Revolution, is backed by multi-billionaires who have pushed a broader attack on teachers and public education as a whole.

Last month, Deasy bowed to pressure from the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) as well as the school board and resigned with a year left on his contract. During his tenure as superintendent, Deasy became hated by teachers for his reactionary measures, as he often publicly complained about the difficulty involved in firing teachers.

Last June, Deasy applauded the *Vergara v California* ruling, which marked a new stage in the assault on public education and teachers’ job security. In just one year during Deasy’s administration, the firings of teachers increased by a factor of 10.

Deasy’s unpopularity among teachers was considered an impediment to the strategy of attacking teachers, utilizing the services of the UTLA. As the announcement from Cortines makes clear, the privatization of public education will continue, if anything at an accelerated pace.

Cortines, 82, is now serving as LAUSD superintendent for the third time, after retiring in 2011. He has a long experience in working with private corporations. During his previous appointment as superintendent in 2009-2011, he also served on the board of Scholastic Inc., an educational publishing

corporation with over \$16 million in contracts with LAUSD. He received an additional \$150,000 a year from that company, on top of his \$250,000 salary from the school district.

Cortines was in charge when a series of scandals, from misuse of funds to lack of financial controls, plagued the district in 2009. The scandals involved management personnel appointed by Cortines himself.

Under the guise of promoting parental involvement, Parent Revolution has pushed the “parent trigger” scheme with generous funding from billionaires like Eli Broad, Bill Gates, the Walton Family and the Hewlett Family. Powerful foundations controlled by these individuals are actively pursuing the creation of new business opportunities that require the privatization of public education.

Parent Revolution invoked the parent trigger law on two previous occasions. In 2010, parents at McKinley Elementary in Compton who had signed the petition claimed Parent Revolution gathered signatures by pressure, deception and sometimes even by threats of deportation. The conversion failed.

In 2013, after a yearlong struggle, Desert Trails Elementary in Adelanto became the first school converted into a charter operation through parent trigger, despite protests by dozens of parents that their petition signatures—required to constitute a majority—were gathered under false pretenses.

The “parent trigger” movement is part of a drive, spearheaded by the Obama administration, to privatize public education and undermine teacher rights throughout the country. Hundreds of thousands of teachers and other education workers have lost their jobs over the past six years, while at least 4,000 schools have been shut down and the number of charter schools has doubled.

The UTLA has played a particularly pernicious role in backing the privatization drive in Los Angeles. The union's support for Cortines as an alternative to Deasy is particularly revealing. The union's president, Alex Caputo-Pearl, said, "The departure of John Deasy indicates an opportunity to shift to a more collaborative management style... It indicates a shift away from a corporate turnaround model for public schools."

In other words, UTLA seeks to be LAUSD's partner in a joint campaign to dismantle public education. The main concern of the union is to preserve its dues base. UTLA already organizes and supports charter schools and collects dues from more than 900 charter educators.

Moreover, the UTLA, along with the major unions throughout California, is a strong backer of Democratic Governor Jerry Brown, who has imposed savage cuts to public education. "The governor's been pretty good on education," Caputo-Pearl said.

What worries the union executives is that they may be cut out from the privatization process. They want the state and corporations to include their services to ensure teachers' subordination to the demands of the corporate and financial elite.

Caputo-Pearl himself has posed as a "left" and has received the support of a host of organizations that orbit around the Democratic Party. This includes the International Socialist Organization (ISO), which, during the last UTLA elections, presented Caputo-Pearl as an alternative to the "union adrift under Warren Fletcher," the previous president.

The ISO lauded Caputo-Pearl and his Union Power (UP) slate because "an important model for UP's slate is the Chicago Teachers Union [CTU]. Caputo-Pearl and other UP candidates have a longstanding relationship with leading members of the Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators [CORE], which won leadership of the CTU in 2010 and led the successful CTU strike of September 2012."

The Chicago teachers' strike is, in fact, the clearest example of the role of the unions in backing the attack on teachers. The union shut down the strike of 26,000 teachers in 2012 on terms dictated by Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, a close ally of the Obama administration. Following the end of the strike, 50 public schools were shut down in the district.

Jesse Sharkey, a member of the ISO, was vice president of the CTU at the time, and is now the

union's acting president.



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