

With platform changes, Democrats seek to conceal record of attacks on public education

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In the face of the widespread hostility from teachers towards the anti-public education policies carried out by the Obama administration, the Democratic Party, working in collusion with the teachers' unions, has made a few rhetorical changes to the party platform in order to falsely promote Hillary Clinton as a defender of teachers and public education.

The changes deal with charter schools, high-stakes testing and “democratic control” of school districts. There is, of course, no mention that the Obama administration went even further than his Republican predecessor in attacking public education on behalf of Wall Street and private education businesses.

The platform is nonbinding in any case and will have absolutely no effect on Clinton or any other elected Democrats. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders has claimed these and other changes have produced the “most progressive platform” in the history of the Democratic Party, clearing the way for him to endorse Clinton, a warmonger and highly paid tool of corporate America.

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, who has betrayed one struggle of teachers after another while cultivating close ties to Bill Gates and other billionaire enemies of public schools, acted as an adviser to the Democratic Party platform committee that altered the wording.

The changes attempt to place a “progressive” veneer over the destruction of public schools through the language of identity politics, continually referencing “students of color, students with disabilities and English Language Learners.” This is aimed at concealing the class character of the bipartisan assault education by presenting it instead as an issue of “institutional racism.”

This explanation is aimed at advancing the interests of a layer of affluent African American and Hispanic entrepreneurs and politicians who are seeking to cash in from the dismantling of public education and the growing

private education business. In Detroit, for example, state and local Democrats have colluded with the Republican governor to attack teachers and expand charters in the name of ending emergency management and returning the school district to “democratic control.”

The new draft shifts away from the blunt commitment to expand charter schools, stating that Democrats now “believe that high quality public charter schools should provide options for parents, but should not replace or destabilize traditional public schools. Charter schools must reflect their communities, and thus must accept and retain proportionate numbers of students of color, students with disabilities and English Language Learners in relation to their neighborhood public schools.”

The Democratic Party is absolutely cynical in its consideration of education. Charter school hustlers, handed public assets by local Democratic Party officials, have repeatedly been involved in corruption scandals. “School choice,” a slogan championed by Hillary Clinton’s husband when he was president in the 1990s, has only expanded inequality. The poorest sections of students are forced into charters after their local public schools are closed, and public education, drained of funding by both parties, is kept on a shoestring budget.

One of the most hated components of Obama’s Race To The Top (RTTT) is high-stakes testing, which was used to shut down schools by the thousands across the country. The original platform stated that Democrats will “hold schools, districts, communities, and states accountable for raising achievement levels for all students.”

The new language is written to hide the plan to continue punitive, high-stakes testing. It reads, “We oppose high-stakes standardized tests that falsely and unfairly label students of color, students with disabilities and English Language Learners as failing, the use of standardized test scores as the basis for refusing to fund schools or to close schools, and the use of student test scores in teacher and

principal evaluations, a practice which has been repeatedly rejected by researchers. We also support enabling parents to opt their children out of standardized tests without penalty for either the student or their school.”

This is exactly what Obama and his former education secretary Arne Duncan have done for years. Under Obama’s tenure, nearly 8,000 public schools and over 300,000 public teaching jobs have been wiped out. At the same time, charter school enrollment has nearly doubled to three million and in major cities like Washington, DC, Philadelphia and Detroit charters provide instruction to large percentages, if not the majority, of students while schools in New Orleans have been completely chartered.

“School choice” used to be a fringe proposal of the most reactionary Republicans. First laid out by conservative economist Milton Friedman in 1955, it remained deeply unpopular until Democratic President Bill Clinton implemented the first bill funding charter schools, entitled the Charter School Expansion Act of 1998.

In 2001, Republican President George W. Bush signed the reactionary “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) law. Co-authored by Massachusetts Democratic senator and liberal stalwart Edward Kennedy, the measure introduced high-stakes testing used to close so-called failing schools and scapegoat teachers for the educational problems caused by poverty and ruthless budget cutting.

While millions of educators voted for Obama in 2008 in hopes of ending the hated NCLB law, Obama escalated the assault on public education. While he bailed out the Wall Street banks after the 2008 crash, Obama deliberately starved the states, municipalities and school districts of desperately needed resources forcing them more and more into debt. The White House then dangled federal Race To The Top (RTTT) money to cash-starved districts, rewarding only those which lifted caps on the number of charter schools, destroyed teacher tenure and imposed merit pay and other reactionary “school reform” measures. School maintenance funds were also deferred, now resting at over \$500 billion in required maintenance for public school buildings.

Under Obama, 38 states cut education spending between 2008 and 2013 and many are still spending less than they did before the financial crash. There is a yearly \$46 billion spending gap on building maintenance and modernization for the remaining schools. At the same time, Obama’s education policies include a 50 percent

increased budget for charter schools in 2016.

These are not just policies of Democrats at the federal level. At the local level, Democratic mayors such as Rahm Emanuel of Chicago, Dave Bing of Detroit, and Michael Nutter of Philadelphia attacked teachers and proceeded to close schools, citing a “lack of money.”

Hillary Clinton is heir apparent to these policies, the meaningless changes to the platform notwithstanding. Last month she was briefly booed during a speech before the National Education Association for promoting charters. The opposition to Obama’s reactionary “school reform” agenda, however, runs exponentially deeper among rank-and-file teachers.

Over the past year, the opposition to the attack on education erupted with wildcat strikes by teachers in Detroit and Compton, California and in student walkouts in Boston, Chicago and Detroit over budget cutting. Increasingly, teachers and students are coming into conflict with the trade unions, which function not as instruments to defend them but as tools of the big-business politicians attacking public education.

The AFT and NEA, which were among the first to endorse Clinton, do not represent teachers. Instead they protect the interests of an affluent upper-middle-class layer of union executives who are only looking for a “seat at the table” with a cut of the spoils from the destruction of public education. As for the Democrats, they look to unions to suppress teacher opposition.

Rank-and-file teachers must prepare their coming struggles by building new organizations of struggle, controlled by the rank and file and independent of the AFT and NEA. Above all the fight to defend and vastly improve public education is a political struggle that pits the working class as a whole against the capitalist profit system, which enriches the few engaged in the outright theft of public resources.

This requires a break with both big-business parties and capitalist politics as a whole. Only the Socialist Equality Party and its presidential and vice presidential candidates, Jerry White and Niles Niemuth, are advancing a socialist program to defend high-quality public education and other social rights.



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