

As new school year begins

Teachers, students in US face battle to defend public education

Evan Blake
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As the new school year begins in the United States, an estimated 50.4 million public school students and 3.1 million teachers are returning to their classrooms after summer recess. While teachers welcome their students and begin early year instruction, a severe crisis looms over public education, with school districts operating with reduced funding, students confronting program cuts and overcrowded classrooms, and teachers facing a frontal assault on their jobs and livelihoods.

While the financial criminals who crashed the economy have fully recovered their fortunes due to the Wall Street bailout and the re-inflation of the stock market bubble, every politician from President Obama down to the school district level claims “there is no money” for public schools.

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), educational funding from federal, state and local governments has fallen in a majority of states since 2008. At least half the states will spend less on per-pupil general funding this year than they did before the financial collapse. Title I, the largest federal education program for high-poverty schools, is four percent below its 2008 level.

Some 300,000 teachers and other educational staff have lost their jobs under the Obama administration as enrollment has risen by roughly 1.1 million. Even though many of the nearly 100,000 public school buildings are badly in need of repairs and the cost of required school building maintenance is estimated at half a trillion dollars nationally, capital expenditures have fallen by an astonishing 37 percent since 2008.

In district after district, politicians from both big-business parties are implementing pro-corporate “school reform” policies, which scapegoat teachers, close public schools and funnel even more money into for-profit charter operations and other private education businesses.

Neither one of the candidates running for US president—Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump—is offering any solution to this crisis.

The billionaire real estate mogul Trump is seeking to exploit economic insecurity and political disaffection in order to build up a fascistic movement based on anti-immigrant chauvinism. In a speech last Thursday before the right-wing veterans group American Legion, Trump pledged to promote “pride and patriotism” in schools, while “teaching respect” for the US flag and the Pledge of Allegiance.

Clinton is no less an enemy of working people than Trump. The favored candidate of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus, Clinton has insisted that she is far more willing to go to war against Russia and China—two nuclear-armed powers—than Trump.

Although the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) have endorsed her, Clinton has a proven track record of attacking teachers and public education.

During the 1990s, Bill and Hillary Clinton were among the first Democrats to adopt the Republicans’ right-wing agenda of “school choice,” which called for introducing the methods of the market into public education. This culminated in President Clinton’s signing the Charter School Expansion Act of 1998, the first bill to fund charter schools.

Hillary Clinton’s campaign web site boasts, “As a US senator [from 2001-2009], she served on the Senate Health, Education and Labor Committee, as a key member shaping the No Child Left Behind Act,” the hated program that led to high-stakes testing. The largest donor to the Clinton Foundation is Bill Gates, a fervent enemy of public education.

In upholding the education record of Obama and his former education secretary Arne Duncan, Hillary Clinton is promising to escalate policies that led to the shutdown of nearly 8,000 public schools, the doubling of charter school enrollment and Obama’s 2016 federal budget that includes a 50 percent funding increase for charters.

Regardless of who wins the election, the drive to war, efforts to suppress political dissent and the deepening assault on public education will drive masses of educators, parents and students into mass struggles.

2016 saw an increase in opposition to the attack on the right to a quality public school education. The most significant fight took place in Detroit at the beginning of the year when teachers conducted coordinated “sickouts,” which culminated in the shutdown of the whole district during a visit to the city by President Obama. The protests against filthy and rodent-infested school buildings, overcrowded classrooms and wage and benefit concessions were organized by rank-and-file teachers in defiance of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), which has long collaborated with the local Democratic Party establishment to decimate education. When teachers were threatened with court injunctions, high school students walked out to defend them.

Other protests and struggles have erupted in Compton, California, Boston and Chicago. There is also growing anger against a sellout deal being pushed by the Cleveland Teachers Union, which would tie the salaries of 5,300 teachers to the passage of a regressive tax on residents of the second-poorest big city in America.

The struggle of American teachers, workers and youth is part of a universal struggle around the world. Across Mexico, thousands of teachers have been on strike for the past three and a half months, in opposition to the government’s reactionary education “reform” and the withholding of salaries. Over the past year in Brazil, thousands of teachers have taken to the streets to protest working conditions, including a 44-day strike against pension cuts in 2015 that was brutally suppressed by the military police, leaving over 200 wounded. Shortly thereafter, Sao Paulo teachers held a 92-day strike, followed by a 110-day strike in Rio de Janeiro, the longest education-related strikes in Brazilian history.

The growing movement to defend the right to high-quality public education must have a new political perspective, strategy and leadership. It is becoming increasingly apparent to millions that the defense and improvement of public education and every other social right of working people is increasingly incompatible with a system that subordinates the interests of the vast majority of the population to the ever-greater enrichment of a financial oligarchy.

The assault on education coincides with the looting of pensions, the privatization of public services and the robbery of other public assets by hedge fund managers and other billionaire investors. These same reactionary forces are also behind the military violence that has plundered and destroyed entire societies like Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and

Syria.

Teachers have repeatedly been blocked from fighting this attack by the AFT and the NEA, which are allied with the Democratic Party, defend the capitalist system and are opposed to a struggle by the working class to break the economic and political dictatorship of the super-rich.

But this is exactly what is needed. The Socialist Equality Party calls on teachers to organize rank-and-file committees to mobilize students, parents and the working-class population in their areas to oppose all budget cuts, school closings, and attacks on teachers’ jobs and living standards. These committees should organize mass meetings, demonstrations and joint strike action to demand full funding for public education.

But nothing can be achieved without a frontal assault on the ill-gotten wealth of the corporate and financial elites. The SEP is fighting to unite every struggle of the working class—against war, police killings, budget cuts and attacks on living standards—into a single political struggle against the capitalist system and for its replacement with socialism.

We reject the claims that there is no money for public education and other essential needs. The SEP calls for the dismantling of the Pentagon war machine, the closure of US foreign bases and the transfer of the nearly \$1 trillion annual military budget for socially useful purposes, including a crash program to hire millions of teachers, repair and construct school buildings and provide all the necessary resources to raise the educational and cultural level of all children, regardless of socioeconomic background.

Only the Socialist Equality Party and its presidential and vice presidential candidates, Jerry White and Niles Niemuth, are advancing such a program. We call upon all teachers, students, educational workers and the entire working class to support and help build our campaign.



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