

Betsy DeVos: Religion and profit in the war on public education—Part 1

Nancy Hanover
13 December 2016

This is the first in a two-part series on the political background and role of Betsy DeVos, who has been nominated by President-elect Donald Trump to lead the Department of Education.

Betsy DeVos, nominated by Donald Trump to the cabinet-level position of Secretary of the Department of Education, will be the first in the agency's more than 35-year history who has neither attended public schools nor sent her own children to them.

The billionaire DeVos family, without a doubt, inhabits a world a million miles away from the overstuffed classrooms, lack of credentialed teachers and crumbling state of American public schools. But Betsy DeVos and husband Dick, eldest scion of the pyramid sales dynasty Amway Corporation, represent something different. They have made the destruction of public education an ideological crusade.

Her advocacy of social choice, DeVos has stated, is aimed at displacing public schools from the center of communities, so that the Church can resume its rightful role. These candid comments were captured during an audiotape of "The Gathering," an annual conference of some of the country's wealthiest Christians, cited in *Politico*.

The outlook is in keeping with both DeVos' Christian Reform Church background and Calvin College training. It is not only a repudiation of the Constitutional separation of church and state, but an explicit opposition to the Enlightenment concept of universal, high quality and secular education, an ideal which animated the American Revolution and decades of struggles, including the civil rights movement.

Donald Trump's first choice for Secretary of Education was reportedly Jerry Falwell, Jr. the head of Liberty University, a bastion of right-wing evangelicalism. Falwell and his father, founder of the Moral Majority, were infamous for their theocratic views opposing the separation of church and state, vicious homophobia, anti-Semitism and general bigotry.

But if DeVos has been less flamboyant than the Falwells, she and her family have been more effective politically. In the service of a social and philosophical counterrevolution, the DeVos clan has bankrolled a right-wing political machine over 30 years, both in Michigan and nationally, complemented by a lavishly-funded public relations juggernaut.

Pro-charter Obama Education Secretary Arne Duncan approvingly called Detroit "ground zero" in "education reform," largely as a result of the political spadework of the DeVos family, which is based in Michigan.

It is impossible to outline the vast extent of the DeVos' war against public education within a brief article, but it should be borne in mind that the following are just a few of her largest initiatives.

DeVos worked with former Michigan Governor John Engler to craft the state's first law authorizing charter schools in 1993. In 2000, the DeVos family spent \$5.6 million on a ballot initiative to amend the state constitution and create a voucher system, which was trounced by voters.

Since that time, the political action committee attached to the DeVos-controlled Great Lakes Education Project has been instrumental in pushing through legislation to expand the number of charter schools in Michigan (they have doubled in number since 2000) and exempt them from most regulation.

It is estimated, according to *Mother Jones*, that the DeVoses have donated "more than \$44 million to the state party, GOP legislative committees, and Republican candidates since 1997." Michigan now boasts the greatest proportion of charter schools run by a for-profit management organization of any state, 80 percent. Moreover, over half of Detroit students attend charter schools, the second highest percentage of any major school district. Two separate year-long studies of charter schools revealed that more than a billion dollars in Michigan has been spent with almost no oversight, including the funding of "ghost schools" that never opened.

Epitomizing the destructive approach of the DeVoses to public schools was their concerted campaign to dissolve the nearly 175-year-old Detroit Public School system last year, which also met with approval from the Obama administration. The couple funneled an average of \$25,000 a day to GOP lawmakers, spending a total of \$1.45 million over two months, to ensure that the final deal would include no local oversight over charter schools. The new entity, the Detroit Community Public Schools, currently educating about 45,000 Detroit students, is underfunded and charter-friendly. It will allow uncertified teachers into the classrooms.

This broadside against public education in Detroit—which once had one of the best public school systems in the country—sparked months-long protests by teachers in defiance of both their union

Arne Duncan's "ground zero" in education reform

and the Obama administration. Backroom deals by the American Federation of Teachers sabotaged the actions of teachers and enabled the passage of the dissolution of the district.

In a *coup de grace*, DeVos-supported legislators pressed for legislation to strip striking teachers of their certification. The legislature included a new mechanism to impose strict new fines and the possibility of termination for teachers protesting the attack on public education. This was followed up with a recent measure, passed by the state House, stipulating up to \$10,000 a day in fines for “illegal” mass picketing, in a blatant violation of the First Amendment.

At the same time, the DeVoses have steadily ramped up their war on education nationally over decades. They established a political action committee, All Children Matter (ACM) in 2003 with fellow billionaire John Walton (son of Walmart founder Sam Walton) and the Koch brothers, to better fund privatization drives. Following legal challenges for the violation of campaign reporting laws in Ohio, the lobbying group reformulated itself as the American Federation for Children (AFC), and continued to be funded by the DeVoses.

In 2011, Wisconsin Republican Governor Scott Walker, a DeVos ally, attempted to slash billions from teachers and other public workers’ benefits as well as eliminate their collective bargaining rights. Tens of thousands of workers and young people staged protests in response, and the DeVoses intervened. They provided a massive cash infusion to the embattled governor through AFC in order to oppose his attempted recall. Since that time, AFC has spent at least \$4.5 million on independent expenditures and issue ads in Wisconsin. (It should be noted that they would not have been successful were it not for the decision of the major Madison-area unions to implement the cuts, so long as dues checkoffs were maintained).

AFC aggressively promotes a national school privatization agenda via its financial sponsorship of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a powerful corporate “bill mill” which promotes right-wing policy throughout the US. Thousands of state legislators are members of ALEC. Their projects include school “choice,” tax changes to subsidize private schools, “parent trigger” bills and anti-tenure lobbying. Other right-wing causes championed by the well-funded council include “stand your ground” gun laws, anti-immigration measures, voter identification rules and opposition to environmental regulation.

Betsy DeVos continues to lobby for vouchers through the AFC, is currently working with the Michigan Freedom Fund to destroy the Michigan public workers’ pension system, and provided substantial resources to the successful campaign to make Michigan a “right-to-work” state. The DeVoses have played leading roles in a litany of pro-privatization organizations: Children First America, Advocates for School Choice, the American Education Reform Council, the Education Freedom Fund, Choices for Children, Jeb Bush’s Foundation for Excellence in Education (specializing in online charters) and the Great Lakes Education Project (GLEP).

In the hot-house circles of ultra-wealthy Dutch Christian Reform Church members in Western Michigan, there were two preeminent families, both sharing similar worldviews. The first were the DeVoses, whose wealth stemmed from the wildly profitable pyramid scheme Amway founded by Rich DeVos, Sr. The second were the Princes, relatives of billionaire car parts manufacturer Edgar Prince. Betsy DeVos is the daughter of Edgar Prince and she married Dick, the son of Rich DeVos, Sr.

Under the banner of “free enterprise,” the DeVoses developed a specific political/business/social ideology (titled the “American way,” shortened to Amway by Rich DeVos). Their business model combined neo-Calvinist religious obscurantism and bigotry with hucksterism, crass exploitation, borderline or criminal tax-dodging, and the promotion of militarism.

At its core, this philosophy is Christian nationalist, anti-democratic and utterly hostile to the concepts of social and democratic rights. As the WSWS noted, for example, Betsy DeVos is a major financial backer and leader of the Acton Institute, which rejects the right to education and embraces child labor, indicating its benefits would be more widespread if only compulsory education were “abolished.”

The Acton Institute is based heavily on the life and writings of theologian and politician Andrew Kuyper, the “father of Dutch neo-Calvinism,” acknowledged by DeVos as a major ideological influence, according to the *Washington Post*. Kuyper founded the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) of the Netherlands in 1879 specifically to oppose the influence of the French Revolution and humanism. Its central practical aim was state funding for religious schools.

The ARP opposed “popular sovereignty” and sought to create an independent Protestant society with its own schools, papers and hospitals.

The ARP’s role in South Africa was instrumental in the building of Afrikaner cultural, political and economic institutions to restore Afrikaner fortunes following the Boer War, which ultimately led to apartheid, according to Charles Bloomberg’s book *Christian Nationalism and the Rise of the Afrikaner Broederbond*.

DeVos not only financed the Acton Institute, but served on its board of directors for 10 years. Her mother, Elsa Prince Broekhuizen, continues on the board. Politically active in her own right, DeVos’ mother donated nearly half a million dollars to the ballot effort to ban same-sex marriage in California, and was the top individual contributor to Citizens for the Protection of Marriage in Michigan. Even more significantly, she is a contributor to the secretive and highly influential Council for National Policy (see part 2).

To be continued



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

The Acton Institute and the Anti-Revolutionary Party