

Senate moves toward confirmation of billionaire opponent of public schools

Isabelle Belanger
25 January 2017

The confirmation of Trump's pick for education secretary, billionaire proponent of school privatization Betsy DeVos, is being rushed through despite blatant conflicts of interest and her ignorance of basic federal education laws. In a letter Monday, Tennessee Republican Senator Lamar Alexander, chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions, rejected Democratic Party requests for a second hearing. The Republican-controlled Senate will vote on the confirmation January 31.

DeVos and her husband are estimated to have a net worth of \$5 billion. Her family has donated a quarter of million dollars to four of the senators—including Alexander—present at her first education committee hearing on January 17. The family has paid nearly a \$1 million to 21 Republican senators who will vote on her confirmation next week, in addition to the \$2.25 million the DeVos' gave last fall to the Senate Leadership Fund, a super PAC tied to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.

The first hearing took place before the Office of Government Ethics was able to review the immense DeVos financial holdings for potential conflicts of interests. Both Dick and Betsy DeVos have investments and political ties to numerous organizations committed to school privatization and right-wing religious objectives, which could directly benefit from her confirmation.

One involves the student loan collection agency Performant, which does business with the Department of Education. The family's private investment and management firm, RDV Corporation, is affiliated with LMF WF Portfolio, a limited liability corporation listed in regulatory filings as one of several firms involved in a \$147 million loan to Performant Financial Corporation, the *Washington Post* reported.

Performant had 14 contracts worth more than \$20 million—equivalent to 23 percent of its revenue—with the Department of Education. It recently lost a contract bid and is now protesting the decision with the Government Accountability Office.

If confirmed, the *Post* reported, "DeVos would be in a

position to influence the award of debt collection, servicing and recovery contracts, in addition to the oversight and monitoring of the contracts. She would also have the authority to revise payments and fees to contractors for rehabilitating past-due debt."

Rejecting the request for a second hearing, Alexander said DeVos was currently answering "837 written follow-up questions" and that she has already "spent considerably more time answering questions of committee members than either of President Obama's education secretaries. I do not know why our committee should treat a Republican nominee so differently than the nominee of a Democratic president."

During the January 17 hearing DeVos demonstrated her hostility towards public education and the basic democratic principle that all children, regardless of socio-economic background, race or disabilities, should be provided a high-quality public education.

After being asked if she agrees that all schools—public, charter or private—that receive federal funding should be required to comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a federal civil rights law, she responded that it would be a "matter ... best left to the states." She then referred to a Florida program that requires parents to sign away their IDEA rights in exchange for a private school voucher.

When asked by Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.) if all schools receiving federal funds, whether public, charter or private schools receiving voucher money, should be held to the same standards of accountability, she repeatedly evaded the question, stating only that she supports "accountability."

When questioned about gun-free zones around schools, proposed after the Sandy Hook, Connecticut school massacre in 2012, DeVos gave a bizarre answer citing the need for guns to protect against grizzly bear attacks in a Wyoming school.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* detailed in its series, "Betsy DeVos: Religion and profit in the war on public education" (Part One and Part Two), the appointment of DeVos is aimed at destroying public education and

funneling even more public money into the hands of for-profit charter operators, religious institutions and other businesses. She is one of several Trump cabinet and sub-cabinet selections, including for the departments of Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development and Labor, as well as the EPA, who are tasked with destroying social reforms that the corporate and financial oligarchy considers illegitimate deductions from their profit.

DeVos, the former Republican Party chairwoman in Michigan and chair of the school privatization group American Federation for Children, pushed for laws for the use of public funds to pay for private school tuition and the spread of charter schools, with little or no oversight. Michigan now has one of the highest number of charters and largest percentage run by for-profit companies in the country.

Last week, the state School Reform Office announced that 38 schools—including 24 in Detroit—could soon be closed because they have ranked in the bottom five percent for academic performance since 2014. If the schools are not closed, under the state's law, academics can be put under the control of a CEO, the principal and half the staff can be replaced or the school could be converted into a charter school.

The grandstanding of the Democrats as the defenders of public education, however, is completely fraudulent. The stage was set for DeVos by the Democrats who have colluded with the Republicans in a decades-long assault on public education. In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton first adopted the right-wing, pro-market nostrums of “school choice” long promoted by the Republican right and it has been central to the Democratic Party, on the federal, state and local level, ever since.

For eight years, the Obama administration and congressional Democrats worked with Republicans to implement and intensify the anti-public-school measures contained in the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The use of standardized tests to scapegoat teachers for the educational problems caused by decades of school cuts and the growth of poverty escalated under Obama. Restrictions on allocations of Title I funding, intended to increase financial support to schools serving high percentages of students in poverty, were replaced by competitive grants known as Race To The Top, pitting poor schools against each other in a competition for desperately needed Title I funds. The number of students in charter schools more than doubled under Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan.

Far from “grilling” DeVos at the hearing, Democrats never asked about her financial and political ties to organizations such as the Acton Institute, which is dedicated

to ending compulsory education for children and legalizing child labor. In the end, this was political theater.

Committee members include Patty Murray (D-Washington), who has long experience collaborating with Republicans to enact deep social cuts, Hillary Clinton's former running mate Tim Kaine (D-Virginia), who called for a 26 percent reduction in funding to public colleges and universities in Virginia in his final term as Governor, and Elizabeth Warren (D-Massachusetts) who, in her book, *The Two Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Parents Are Going Broke*, (2003), called for the introduction of a universal school voucher that would allow families to send their children to any public school, which would to the closure of many inner-city schools.

The handing of the education secretary's position to a billionaire and avowed enemy of public education will lead to an immense escalation of the war against this most basic democratic right. Neither the Democrats nor the teacher unions will do anything to oppose these attacks. The American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, which openly collaborated with Obama, will, if anything, be more willing to offer up their services in suppressing the opposition by teachers, out of fear that they will be cut out of the process of pro-business “school reform.”

The coming months and years will see the eruption of social opposition to the destruction of public education. This must be politically independent from both corporate-controlled parties and advance an anti-capitalist program against the domination of society by the corporate and financial aristocracy, which is now putting one of its own in charge of public education.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact