

How the Democrats paved the way for Betsy DeVos

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The Senate's confirmation Tuesday of Betsy DeVos has placed a sworn enemy of public education and a proponent of for-profit charter schools and religious schooling at the helm of the US Department of Education. Like Trump's other cabinet appointees, DeVos is committed to dismantling the very department she heads and to lifting any restrictions on private businesses seeking to cash in on America's \$1.3 trillion "education market."

With the confirmation of the Michigan billionaire, the American oligarchy has installed one of its own. The beneficiary of the merger of two family fortunes in Michigan—the former Prince auto parts empire and the Amway Corporation pyramid scheme—DeVos and her husband have an estimated net worth of \$5 billion. Over two decades, the family has spent millions of dollars funding pro-privatization organizations and buying legislators.

Michigan has the country's highest percentage of charter schools run by for-profit management companies and among the weakest regulations on the publicly funded and privately run schools. Under the state's school "reform" law, nearly half of Detroit's public schools are currently targeted for closure and potential transformation into private charters.

Trump has pledged to promote anti-teacher "merit" pay and spend \$20 billion on school "choice." The voucher policy in the state of Indiana is being suggested as a national model. In 2013, then Indiana Governor and now Vice President Mike Pence expanded the program, initiated by his Republican predecessor as a "social justice" initiative for poor children, to provide vouchers for up to half of their tuition to more affluent middle-class families with children already in private schools. Almost all the private schools eligible for vouchers are religious.

Millions of school teachers, parents and students are rightfully alarmed and realize that the coming months and years will require the most serious fight to defend public education. The prerequisite for developing a strategy for such a battle is a political understanding of what produced Trump and DeVos.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, the coming

to power of a government of billionaires, ex-generals and ultra-reactionaries marks a qualitative change. However, Trump is not a sudden departure from the otherwise healthy development of US political and social life. On the contrary, he is the outcome of the long decay of American capitalism and the rise to the pinnacle of economic and political power of a corporate and financial aristocracy, which has sought to defend its global domination through endless wars overseas and a war against the social rights of the working class.

Perhaps nowhere in the realm of domestic policy is the continuity of Trump with previous administrations, Democrat or Republican, seen than in the decades-long assault on public education.

Before the 1980s, the proponents of "free market" education policies were only to be found on the most right-wing fringes of the Republican Party. In the mid-1950s, Chicago economist Milton Friedman first put forward his proposal for school vouchers to spend public money on private and religious schools, thereby creating "competition" for the public-school system.

Efforts by Ronald Reagan to introduce vouchers in the early 1980s failed due to popular support for the democratic and egalitarian principles embodied in public education.

Friedman's voucher plan was, however, instituted by the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1981.

It took the Democrats, under President Bill Clinton in the mid-1990s, to rebrand this right-wing attack on public education as "school choice" for poor families. The Democratic president sharply increased federal spending for so-called public charter schools, whose numbers increased between 1992 and 2000 from 1 to more than 1,700.

"We should reward the best schools, and we should shut down or redesign those that fail," Clinton declared in 1996, the same year his wife, Hillary Clinton wrote in her memoir, "I favor promoting choice among public schools." Also in 1996, Milton Friedman and his wife launched the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, an organization Betsy DeVos would subsequently fund and promote.

Coming in the aftermath of the 1990-91 dissolution of the

USSR and the capitalist triumphalism that followed, the Clintons spearheaded the Democratic Party's repudiation of the social reforms associated with the New Deal and Great Society periods. Their free-market education policies coincided with the destruction of welfare as a federal entitlement program, a law-and-order crackdown on the poor, and Wall Street deregulation, which led to an explosion of financial speculation, the bursting of the dot.com bubble in 2000 and the Crash of 2008.

In 2002, George W. Bush would sign into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), coauthored by Democratic liberal icon Edward Kennedy. Under the scheme, schools that failed to improve under test-based Annual Yearly Progress assessments could be closed, turned into charter schools or "reorganized" by state officials. Various punitive "accountability" schemes scapegoated teachers for educational problems caused by poverty and decades of budget cutting.

In 2000, the DeVos family spent \$13 million to push a referendum to amend Michigan's constitutional ban on vouchers. However, like a similar measure in California that year, Michigan voters defeated the plan by a more than 2-to-1 margin.

The Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), a political action committee run by hedge fund managers including Teach For America cofounder Whitney Tilson, was formed between 2005-07 to promote their interests in the charter and edubusiness sector. Democrats representing Anchorage Capital Partners (\$8 billion under management), Greenlight Capital (\$6.8 billion), and other for-profit companies signed up to promote the legislative assault on public education. Senator Barack Obama was a speaker at the inaugural meeting, and Arne Duncan was later recommended by DFER for Education Secretary.

It was under President Obama that the most sweeping attacks on public education occurred. Despite the unions' claims to the contrary, Obama and Duncan doubled down on NCLB. More than 300,000 teachers and other school jobs were permanently eliminated during Obama's eight years.

Under the Race To The Top (RTTT) program, cash-starved school districts were encouraged to compete for "performance-based" grants based on their level of "innovation." The markers of such innovation were merit pay, the adoption of Common Core (highly lucrative for testing companies and other edubusinesses) and the promotion of charter schools.

Obama hailed the 2010 firing of teachers and other school employees at Central Falls High School in Rhode Island after they rejected a "turnaround" plan of the type promoted by Duncan that would have torn up their contracts and forced them to work longer hours without additional pay.

During the eight years of the Obama's assault on public education, the teachers' unions—the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA)—all but ended teacher strikes, which had long been a regular feature of American life. When a strike was called, as in Chicago in 2012, the unions quickly shut it down to prevent a confrontation with the Obama administration, leading to mass school closings in Chicago, Philadelphia and other cities.

Far from opposing corporate-driven school reform, the unions insisted that it could be implemented more efficiently if state and local authorities used the services of the AFT and the NEA to suppress resistance. In Detroit, the AFT, working with local Democrats, shut down a series of sickouts, launched in defiance of the union, and facilitated the restructuring of the public school district under a Republican plan largely shaped by DeVos.

During DeVos's confirmation hearings, Democrats staged a publicity stunt on the floor of the Senate before Vice President Pence cast his tie-breaking vote for DeVos. Afterwards, AFT President Randi Weingarten hailed the "movement for children" that would supposedly "serve as a check and balance" on the new education secretary. Weingarten held open the AFT's "invitation" to DeVos to "work with educators," but lamented that "it was more likely we'll now hear the same trashing of public schools that the disrupters, the privatizers and the austerity hawks have used for the last two decades."

There is no doubt that major battles are on the horizon. As this brief summation makes clear, however, the privatizers and austerity hawks have long included the Democratic Party, with which the unions are aligned. The struggle to defend and vastly improve public education therefore requires the building of a mass political and socialist movement independent of both big-business parties. Such a movement must be based on the working class, whose social interests are inseparably bound up with the fight to end social inequality and the economic and political dictatorship of the oligarchy.



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