

“If you don’t have an education, you don’t have a life”

Teachers speak out on the schools crisis and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos

Nancy Hanover
23 February 2017

New US Education Secretary billionaire Betsy DeVos has lost no time in making known her ideological opposition to public education, contempt for educators and hostility to democratic rights.

Her installation has evoked strong opposition from teachers, who rightly see DeVos as the spearhead of a ramped up attack at all levels on public education.

Following her narrow Cabinet confirmation, DeVos’ first appearance was a brief visit to a public school, Washington DC’s Jefferson Middle School Academy, on February 10. Her arrival was greeted with protests by parents and teachers, temporarily preventing her from entering into the school.

Speaking to the press after the visit, DeVos insulted the teachers, haughtily characterized them as in “receive mode ... waiting to be told what they have to do, and that’s not going to bring success to an individual child.” She has routinely referred to public schools as a “dead end.”

In a subsequent interview with the right-wing news site Townhall, DeVos alleged the protests were “not genuine”. “We’ve seen enough written that they want to make my life a living hell”, she added. Also denouncing the protesters was American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, who tweeted, “Just heard a protester blocked & almost knocked Secy @BetsyDeVos down at Jefferson. We don’t condone such acts. We want her to go to pub schls.”

DeVos has now made the highly unusual and expensive demand that she be accompanied by US federal marshals for the foreseeable future. No Cabinet-level secretary has requested a similar level of protection since at least 2009.

The secretary is not just fearful of protesting teachers, she also issued a not-so-veiled threat that any Education Department employees who try to “subvert the mission” (her pro-privatization agenda) would be attended to “swiftly and surely”, according to Townhall.

For his part, President Trump reiterated his support for privatization at a White House “listening session” with a

handpicked group of parents on February 14. Trump, with DeVos at his side, described charter schools “fantastic”, “amazing” and “unbelievable.” He has pledged \$20 billion in federal aid for school vouchers through block grants to the states or a federally funded scholarship tax credit program written into the tax code.

In an interview with Axios published February 17, DeVos stated that she would “be fine” with the abolition of the Department of Education and predicted the flowering of all types of schools except public ones. “I expect there will be more public charter schools. I expect there will be more private schools. I expect there will be more virtual schools. I expect there will be more schools of any kind that haven’t even been invented yet.”

Teachers spoke to the WSWWS describing their reactions to the Trump administration’s privatization policies, DeVos, the threat to close nearly half of Detroit’s public schools, the failure of the teachers’ unions to stand up for educators and the broader political issues involved in defending democratic rights and public education.

Susan, a retired teacher from Vermont, said. “I am glad there is resistance. After George Bush, Obama and the Democrats did worse.

“I always vote, but didn’t vote for Obama either time. When he was a senator he said what he would do—testing, competitions, standardization, pretty much ‘Make Schools Great!’ Since Jimmy Carter, I have voted ‘other,’ just to register my opposition to business as usual.

“Public schools are taking the rap for the fact that there is great poverty in this country. Our large schools are more than 95 percent impoverished. Teachers are supposed to solve the problems of unemployment, homelessness and access to books?

“Our unions are not helping. The teacher unions went for Hillary Clinton before it was even a contest. It was really disgusting.

“Frankly, they are getting what they deserve—not the

teachers, but the higher-ups. These teacher ‘leaders’ took Gates money, made ‘Share My Lesson’, a disgusting pretense for doing something to help teachers. Randi Weingarten implied that teachers ‘weren’t ready’ for Common Core and needed help—blaming the teachers, as if they were not smart enough.

“The unions provided no resistance to Common Core either. Common Core is just corporate America making a buck. I was a longtime member of the National Council of Teachers of English. I resigned over their support of Common Core. They refused to denounce it and even made a buck publishing books on how to do it. All of our professional organizations just lay down and asked corporate America to kick us again.”

In the city of Detroit, the DeVos family’s policies have resulted in a battery of pro-privatization legislation and the control of 80 percent of charters by for-profit businesses. The growth of charter schools and edubusinesses in DeVos’ home state of Michigan, as elsewhere, proliferated under the Obama administration’s Race to the Top.

A young first-year teacher in a Detroit public schools said, “I am not originally from Michigan so I didn’t know much about Betsy DeVos before now. Working in Detroit schools and talking with other educators, I see the effects of her policies already.

“They are trying to shut between 8 and 10 of the Education Achievement Authority schools and dozens of Detroit Public School Community District schools, some this year and some next.

“From what I heard, the charter districts are already looking to buy these schools. That’s how underhanded things are already. Charters have had a terrible effect on Detroit. With DeVos in office, what I’ve seen will happen all around the nation.

“In my district, the neighborhood is the worst of the worst. The homes are abandoned; there are fires everywhere. These are ‘forgotten’ neighborhoods, those in poverty.

“We’re got seven-year-olds at pre-K reading levels. Seeing children two years behind is common. Our school is severely underfunded with computers. My children get no time with computers, but they need to because the tests are all online. The computer testing starts in kindergarten.

“Then bonuses are paid to the teachers based on the test scores and if there has been ‘student growth’. Attendance is a big problem. Often kids are gone for six or seven days, then in school for two. It’s really hard to make gains like that.”

The elementary teacher added her strong opposition to the administration’s attacks on immigrants. “As an undergraduate, I studied Spanish and my parents suggested I become an ICE officer. I wouldn’t because I didn’t want to

send anyone back. It’s so deplorable. No one is a native here, unless you are Native American, and we see how they are treated.

“The claims that immigrants are taking jobs are just used to fuel the fire. They want to use this hot button issue to change what people are focusing on, like cutting the EPA, women’s rights or the national parks. Deporting people goes against basic fundamental human rights and even how our country was founded. I can’t even believe this is happening in 2017.”

Beverly, a Detroit Community Public Schools District teacher, said: “I am in one of the priority schools but it’s not on the list for closure. I try to speak out and be positive.

“What a lot of people fail to understand about the school closures is that it is not just academics which can put a school on the list, but also attendance. If the children don’t come to school for whatever reason—their transportation breaks down, their parent has to go to work—the school can be put on the list and the school be closed.

“A school can have most of the children improving, say 90 percent, but if that other 10 percent falls, this will pull the scores down. That can be another reason the school is judged not to meet Annual Yearly Progress.

“Who are we concerned about? Just for people who are lining their own pockets? We took an oath to educate children to the best of our ability so they have a fighting chance as an adult. But if you don’t have an education, you don’t have a life. What are we building, a community, or nothing?

“If there is no education and people don’t have financial means, a sociological change takes place. They can turn to stealing to find food. I try to be positive, but the powers-that-be, the political people in charge, are more concerned with their riches.

“As to the unions, they sold us out. We’ve had no raise in 10 years. [With the last contract] I got \$90, which they turned around and took it in higher insurance costs. The whole ‘raise’ went to insurance for my family.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact