

Teachers' unions attract few at "March for Public Education" in Washington, D.C.

Our reporters
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About 400 people attended the "March for Public Education" in Washington, D.C. Saturday. The rally, which was dominated by trade union speakers and former members of the Obama administration, was followed by a march to the Department of Education to appeal to the Trump administration.

Trump and his education secretary, billionaire heiress Betsy DeVos, are avowed enemies of public education. The president's proposed budget cuts \$9.2 billion in federal education spending, or 13.5 percent of the Department of Education budget, through the elimination or reduction in funding for more than 30 discretionary programs. This includes slashing funding for teachers' professional development, class size reduction, preschool development grants in low-income communities and after-school programs.

The budget proposal also included a \$1 billion public "school choice program" under Title I, and a \$250 million private school voucher program.

Under conditions of widespread opposition to Trump and DeVos, the pitiful turnout underscored the vast gulf between workers and youth seeking to defend public education and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), which have long collaborated in the attack on teachers and public education.

The event, which followed a week of lobbying Congress by teacher unions, was aimed at boosting a sickly dependence among teachers on the Democratic Party and sections of the Republicans, which the unions claim can be relied on to defend public education. This is after eight years of the Obama administration, which spearheaded the destruction of hundreds of thousands of public school jobs, the doubling of charter school enrollment and the funneling of billions in "education business" to hedge funds and private corporations.

The turnout was also low in Detroit and other cities

where coordinated demonstrations were held. A few hundred attended in Detroit to hear local Democrats and union officials swear their allegiance to public education. Detroit, which was dubbed "ground zero for school reform" by Obama's first education secretary, Arne Duncan, has seen a massive increase in totally unregulated for-profit charter schools, long promoted by DeVos. The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) spent last year colluding with the Democrats to smother wildcat protests by teachers against decaying schools and privatization, and has just accepted a contract proposal that includes merit pay for new teachers.

Keeping in line with the union's nationalist orientation, Lily Eskelsen García, the president of the NEA, the largest teacher union in the United States, led participants at the Washington rally in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to kick off the march. She called attendees "true patriots" for standing up to the Trump administration.

Noxious identity politics were also promoted at the event. Some student and teacher speakers addressed the effect of disabilities, crippling standardized testing regimes, and poverty on student performance. However, a significant number speakers promoted the lie that the attack on education was based on racism, not a ruling class attack on one of the most fundamental social rights won by the working class.

"The Trump administration's attack on public education is racist at heart," Washington Teachers' Union President Elizabeth Davis declared, adding that the spread of charter schools is an attempt to "re-segregate" the nation.

Davis's racialist perspective obscured the role played by the Obama administration and the Democratic Party in the school privatization process. Race to the Top (RTTT), Obama's signature education policy, vastly intensified the pro-charter policies of the Bush administration by forcing

states to compete for federal assistance in exchange for promoting charter schools and increasing standardized testing.

The spread of charter schools has been aided by the teacher unions and local Democratic Party officials, many of them, in cities like Detroit and Baltimore, who are African American. The AFT and NEA have welcomed charters into public school systems with the caveat that the unions be “included” in deciding which schools to close and that they be allowed to enrich their coffers by collecting dues from the exploited employees at charter schools.

Even as Democratic and Republican administrations starve the public education system of funding to pay for unending military interventions abroad, not a single speaker attempted to connect the attacks on public education to militarism and war. In fact, these policies were tacitly endorsed.

In her speech, the Washington Teachers’ Union President Davis mentioned Erik Prince, brother of DeVos and former CEO of private military contracting firm Blackwater. Davis complained that Prince, like DeVos, wanted to “privatize public services,” implicitly suggesting that if such wars were conducted by the US military it would be far better.

While the union functionaries offered no way forward participants at the rally expressed their determination to defend public education. Shannon, a test coordinator in Virginia, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she came to the rally to protest “unfair and unequal education [for] kids.” She said education should be free for all, noting that “a child’s quality of education shouldn’t be decided by geography or being born where there are more resources. Trump Jr. said that ‘education’s a business’. It’s not a business, it’s a public service.”

Cutting military spending would alleviate many problems, Shannon added. “Just 10 percent would be enough to feed, clothe and educate millions of children worldwide. When education and general infrastructure are starved for funding and crumbling here at home, what are these wars abroad actually defending?” she asked.



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