As school year starts teachers, parents and students face political struggle to defend public education

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5 September 2017

Nearly 50 million public school students are starting the new school year, along with three million teachers and well over a million librarians, therapists, aides, school bus drivers and other support staff.

Like every year, schools open with the hope and expectation that by the end of the year, students will emerge more whole and bettered prepared for the future. There is a general sense of optimism that the dedication and hard work of educators and school employees will contribute to a healthier and more generous society.

This conviction, however, repeatedly collides with the social, economic and political realities of America. The US is not a harmonious society but one riven by a deep social and class divide. The relentless pursuit of wealth by the oligarchy, which exercises dictatorial control over the entire political system, is the greatest impediment to social progress.

Nowhere is this demonstrated more clearly than in the decades-long financial starvation of the public schools. Whatever sanctimonious statements the big business politicians make about their supposed commitment to children, the reality is when it comes to bailing out the Wall Street banks, funding criminal wars or paying for public education, they always come down on the side of the super-rich.

The billionaires who occupy the White House and top office of the Department of Education—Donald Trump and Betsy DeVos—are sworn enemies of public education. They intend to accelerate the decades-long campaign, pursued by Democratic and Republican administrations alike, to dismantle public education and funnel even more money into the hands of private business interests.

Trump’s budget proposal includes $1.7 trillion in cuts to social programs, including at least $9.2 billion in education cuts. The budget also includes $1.4 billion to promote “school choice” and voucher programs to siphon off funds from public schools to subsidize private and parochial institutions.

The proposal would cut the proportion of gross domestic product devoted to social spending for low-income and moderate-income families from 2.1 percent to only 1.0 percent in 2027, the lowest percentage since 1966, when the Johnson administration launched its so-called “War on Poverty.” While slashing health care, food stamps and welfare and ramping up attacks on immigrant workers, Trump’s scorched-earth budget will provide hundreds of billions for tax cuts for the rich and the Pentagon war machine.

Far from devoting the necessary resources to rebuild Houston and eastern Texas and aid the more than one million public school students devastated by Hurricane Harvey, federal, state and local authorities plan to follow the same playbook they did after Hurricane Katrina, when the crisis was used to transform New Orleans into an all-charter district.

In this political climate, the coming school year will be more like Dante's journey with Virgil through the nine circles of hell rather than a journey of wonder and enlightenment by teachers and students.

Trump and his government of oligarchs, military generals and Nazi sympathizers are widely hated and mass social struggles are on the agenda. The Democratic Party, however, offers no alternative. The Democrats have attacked Trump from the right, criticizing the billionaire president not for his attacks on immigrants, destruction of social programs or reckless warmongering. Instead, the Democrats have complained that Trump is soft on Russia and are demanding more aggressive military measures even if it threatens to provoke a nuclear war.

The Democrats paved the way for Trump and DeVos through their promotion of pro-corporate “school choice” schemes first pushed by the Clintons in the 1990s. Obama’s “Race To The Top” (RTTP) accelerated the attacks made under Bush’s No Child Left Behind (co-sponsored by

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Democratic liberal stalwart Ted Kennedy), and tying federal school funding even more closely to test-based performance standards.

This has been used to scapegoat teachers for educational problems caused by decades of reduced funding and the immense growth of poverty and to provide a windfall of profits to charter school operators and businesses like Pearsons, McGraw Hill and Apple. Under Obama, nearly 9,000 public schools were closed and the number of students enrolled in charter schools tripled.

Any conception of an enlightened education, focusing on the development of curiosity and critical thought, an understanding of history, and appreciation of and participation in the arts, has been abandoned, because this could not be quantified and monetized.

The Democrats' deregulation of the banks and promotion of financial and real estate speculation put billions into the pockets of criminals like Trump. At the other pole of society, conditions for the working class have never been worse, with poverty soaring and life expectancy declining.

Teachers know that poverty is the greatest obstacle to child development. Pat Levitt, a developmental neuroscientist at the University of Los Angeles and the director of the National Scientific Council, describes poverty as a "neurotoxin." Overcrowding, substandard housing, loud noises, parental separation, exposure to violence and family instability can lead to an increased level of cortisol, which can interfere with the development of brain circuitry as early as in utero.

The precondition for the development of children, therefore, is good nutrition, clean and safe water, a household free from utility shutoffs and poverty and a social infrastructure that includes high-quality education and cultural stimulation provided by teachers and school employees that are secure in their jobs and well-compensated.

Educators know far better than big business politicians what is needed to provide such a learning environment. The main obstacle to marshaling the necessary resources and applying them in a rational way is the domination of society by a modern-day aristocracy whose insatiable appetite is an unbearable burden.

The fight to secure basic social rights—including high quality public education, health care, the eradication of poverty and social inequality, and future free from war—will necessarily thrust teachers and the entire working class into an irrepressible conflict with the corporate and financial elite and its political servants in both political parties.

The last number of years have seen growing opposition to the destruction of public education, from the 2012 Chicago teachers strike, to the mass protests against school closings in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and other cities in 2013, to the wildcat "sickout" strikes by Detroit teachers and students in 2016. This is part of a worldwide fight against the attack on education, which has seen mass struggles in Chile, Mexico and Australia.

Far from waging any struggle, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association have repeatedly sabotaged the resistance of teachers, students and parents. This is because the unions are allied with the Democratic Party and accept without question the supposed "right" of wealthy investors to profit from school and municipal bond debt. Whatever their rhetorical criticisms of Trump and DeVos, union officials such as AFT President Randi Weingarten only want to be partners in the dismantling of public education and the expansion of the for-profit education industry.

Teachers, parents and students must build new organizations of struggle—school and neighborhood committees—to mobilize opposition to budget cuts, layoffs, school closings and privatization.

This must be part of the development of a political counter-offensive by the whole working class to eradicate poverty and vastly expand funding for public education and other essential services. The precondition for such a struggle is a political break with the Democratic Party and all those, including Bernie Sanders, who claim this party of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus can be turned into a "people's party."

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the expropriation of the ill-gotten gains of the Wall Street bankers, hedge funds and private equity firms, and the transformation of the banks and other big financial institutions into public enterprises under the democratic control of the working class.

The SEP insists that the working class has social rights that must be guaranteed regardless of what the corporate-controlled politicians say they can afford. To achieve this, the working class must be politically organized to fight for socialism.

The SEP calls on teachers, parents and students to subscribe to and circulate the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* and to contact the SEP to discuss the strategy and leadership needed for these struggles.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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