

Oklahoma Republicans demand the abolition of public schools

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As teachers' strikes continue to develop across the United States demanding full funding for public schools, an Oklahoma Republican Party official has issued a public call for the abolition of public education on behalf of the state's fourth largest county.

The statement, brought to national attention on November 29 in the *Washington Post*, is breathtaking in its bald assault on the notion of American democracy and historic rights. The fight for public education goes back to the ideals popularized by the American and French Revolutions.

In his letter drafted in advance of the state legislative session, Canadian County GOP chairman Andrew Lopez stated, "A better pathway would be to abolish public education, which is not a proper role of government, and allow the free market to determine pay and funding, eliminating the annual heartache we experience over this subject."

In the immediate sense, Lopez is reacting to last April's powerful ten-day strike by nearly 40,000 Oklahoma educators that followed West Virginia's teacher walkout. Both statewide walkouts defied union leaders and anti-strike laws and led to further strikes in Arizona, Kentucky, North Carolina, Colorado and Washington state. Above all, Lopez is voicing the growing fears of ruling elites over escalating class struggles throughout the US and internationally—from the "Yellow Vests" in France to the mass teachers' strikes in Great Britain, Tunisia, Mexico, Iran and Argentina, to the American autoworkers.

Lopez admonished, "...don't take from others' wealth. Don't eliminate somebody's property rights to fund your child's education," in words which drip with contempt for the rights of the "lower classes" to education. He called all property taxes an encroachment on the "right to property," instead proposing the population engage in "self-education."

That a section of a major US political party can pledge to roll back the struggles of 200 years and strip the working classes of the right to schooling is an indication of how oligarchic, if not aristocratic, America's threadbare "democracy" has become. It is, however, of a piece with the ongoing bipartisan social counterrevolution which seeks the elimination of all social reforms, business regulations, tax increases or anything else that impinges on the self-enrichment of the wealthy.

Thomas Jefferson and the American revolutionaries of 1776

viewed public education as essential to democracy and the ability of the masses to resist the growth of despotism. He famously warned, "The tax which will be paid for [the] purpose [of education] is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance." Today, the ruling elites do not base their rule on an educated populace but live in terror of it.

Emanating from the great Enlightenment traditions of reason, scientific inquiry and the equality of mankind, public education has been regarded for generations as a bedrock responsibility of society. It was central to the democratic vision of the Common Schools movement of Horace Mann, and a cause upheld by abolitionist Thaddeus Stevens, just to name a few among the many far-sighted fighters for the development of the American education system. It was also a central demand of the early working class and socialist movement against child labor, and of the civil rights struggles against racial segregation.

Lopez subsequently bowed to pressure and revised his letter, no longer specifically calling for the abolition of public education, but instead for steep budget cuts. He maintained his insistence that education should not be funded by taxation, stating that "if public education shall continue as a state institution" it should be funded "through such means as sponsorships, advertising, endowments, tuition fees, etc." The essential point remains: education should once again be the province of the well-to-do who can pay tens of thousands annually out of pocket. For the rest of the population, menial work or military service in America's unending imperialist wars will do.

Lopez may be a right-wing Republican who equates public schools, libraries or what remains of the social safety net with "socialism," but he is merely revealing the end-game of what has been a decades-long bipartisan assault upon American education. To be blunt, federal, state and local tax cuts, implemented by Democrats and Republicans, have already rendered public education barely functioning in large swathes of the United States. Educational access is riven by class differentiation.

For the majority, classrooms are overcrowded with students, under-resourced and housed in inadequate or outright

dangerous buildings. Teachers and public-school workers are paying out of their own pockets to self-fund necessary classroom supplies despite poverty-level wages, providing food and other necessities to students, working long unpaid hours and essentially keeping under-funded schools going with their blood, sweat and tears.

While starving schools of money, Democrats and Republicans alike have squandered trillions on corporate tax cuts, Wall Street bailouts and endless wars. The tax burden for the public schools have been shifted from profit-making corporations onto the backs of working people in the form of regressive taxes.

During the two-week teachers strike last April, Oklahoma's Republican governor, Mary Fallin, and the state legislature steadfastly refused to provide any additional funding, after handing over billions in tax cuts to the oil, gas and coal industries that dominate the state. The Democrats, for their part, fully backed the insulting pay and school funding bill rejected by teachers and sought to cover up their own role in the funding crisis. Fallin's Democratic predecessor, Brad Henry, implemented capital gains and income tax reductions for the rich while slashing funding for public education and other essential services.

Allied to the Democrats, the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) and American Federation of Teachers-Oklahoma betrayed the powerful teachers strike and have repeatedly supported regressive school taxes that hit the working class the hardest.

Of course, Lopez has friends in high places. Current Education Secretary billionaire Betsy DeVos' lifelong mission has been the privatization of education, specifically the promotion of religious-based schools and the ending of so-called compulsory education. She and her family have lavishly sponsored an organization that touts child labor, supposedly for its moral enrichment. Federal dollars are now flowing to "workforce development" so that working-class young people can be slotted into employer-based rudimentary training based on corporate demand. Companies like McDonald's, Duke Energy, Piedmont Natural Gas, Pinterest, LinkedIn and Airbnb all receive lucrative tax credits to offer "work-based learning opportunities." These are another form of "internships"—usually at low (or sometimes no) pay—reimagined.

There is a lot of money at stake in privatizing education in a multi-trillion-dollar "education market." Corporate interests already abound, with a huge network of education outsourcing and edu-businesses—from school buses to substitute teacher temp agencies, all paying near-minimum wages. Giant corporations, such as Cisco Systems, Inc., Blackboard Inc., Pearson Plc, McGraw-Hill Education, and Adobe Systems, meanwhile milk school systems for millions of dollars and exercise enormous influence over educational content.

This war against public education, and the pursuit of corollary

business opportunities, has been prosecuted by both Democrats and Republicans. *A Nation at Risk*, the study commissioned by Ronald Reagan and issued in 1983, pioneered the notion of "failing public schools," which has become the major propaganda theme in defunding public education. In 1994, Bill Clinton adopted "Goals 2000," which doubled down on standardized tests and introduced the first competitive grant between school districts, the Technology Literacy Challenge Fund, pitting schools against each other for a small pot of computer technology money. Clinton also handed millions to charter school developers in the name of "school choice."

This trend—support to charter schools, standardized tests and competitive grants—escalated under George Bush (No Child Left Behind) and Obama (Race to the Top). Obama, who bailed out Wall Street in 2008, enacted massive cuts to federal aid to schools, presiding over the eliminating of hundreds of thousands of education jobs. State and local governments likewise cut schools to the bone in the aftermath of 2008, while handing out lavish tax breaks for the wealthy.

While teachers have taken a lead, galvanizing strikes and demonstrations last year around the world and inspiring millions of workers, the unions have revealed their thoroughly anti-working-class character and actively sabotaged this struggle. It is time to draw sharp lessons: the very existence of public education is at stake. The gigantic growth of social inequality—endemic to world capitalism—and democratic values such as public education are entirely incompatible. It is imperative that teachers take the next step by forming rank and file committees to unite teachers and workers in every workplace and neighborhood, independent of the corporate-controlled unions, and link up with ongoing struggles nationally and internationally.

But the right to high quality public education will not be secured without a frontal assault on the vast fortunes of the corporate and financial aristocracy that rules society and controls both political parties. For that the working class must be mobilized as a politically independent and revolutionary force whose aim is the establishment of a workers' government, genuine democracy and social equality, i.e., socialism.



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