

As the new US school year begins

The political battle facing teachers

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As American teachers head back into the classroom for the new school year, the fight to defend public education, secure good conditions for student learning, and ensure the future of both educators and young people has never been so critical—and so political.

Teachers find themselves on the front lines of a vast social and political crisis. Homelessness, poverty, the opioid crisis, youth suicide and mass shootings have become the routine—but nightmarish—experiences of classrooms everywhere. The Trump administration's immigrant raids are traumatizing students, with perpetual fear for their parents or being forced to leave school.

Lack of adequate supplies is endemic, the teacher shortage has multiplied, uncertified teachers are becoming commonplace, and school districts are turning to four-day weeks to pinch pennies. Millions of dollars are diverted to “hardening” schools and arming teachers, yet counselors, nurses, librarians and social workers are “not in the budget.” States and districts continue to take over schools, citing standardized test scores, to charterize them. The Trump administration has continued and deepened the Obama administration's policy of defunding schools and pushing privatization.

In the most profound threat of all, the Democrats have joined with the Republicans imposing unprecedented austerity on the working class while providing the Pentagon with a blank check for military funding and war preparations.

The challenges facing educators this school year are not “American” problems, but international ones. They arise not merely from the fascistic Trump government, but globally from the crisis of capitalism. When “Red Pen” teachers marched in the French “Yellow Vest” protests, they described exactly the same conditions—low wages, lack of supplies, overfilled classrooms—as did striking teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and California.

The upsurge of teachers around the world, from New Zealand to Poland to Bangladesh, underscores the social

power of the working class. Mass protests in Puerto Rico forced the resignation of Governor Ricardo Roselló and included thousands of teachers who demonstrated against mass layoffs, school closures and privatization following Hurricane Maria. Thousands of teachers in Hong Kong are likewise rallying in defense of their students, opposing police attacks and supporting the general strike.

Trump has red-baited teachers as “losers” who “teach socialism from birth,” targeting the determined militancy of educators who have struck and rallied over the last two years. For those like Trump and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, public education, like all social rights achieved through mass struggles of the working class, *is* socialism. They especially detest educators because they have set a powerful example and are standing in the way of plundering the estimated \$4 trillion education market.

Behind these attacks is a sea-change: public spending on schools and universities is regarded not as the essential preparation of future generations, but as an intolerable diversion of resources away from the pockets of the major financial institutions, big business and the ultra-rich. Companies like Pearson not only cash in on lucrative (and socially destructive) standardized testing contracts with US schools, but coordinate with the Gates Foundation and other school privatizers to run “technology-based” low fee private schools to prey on the impoverished in India and Africa.

Capitalism views students as “customers” and education as a profit opportunity. It is not possible to defend public schooling solely on the basis of militancy and determination. It requires a new political perspective.

The biggest lie is that public education can be defended from the rapacious financial elite by relying on the Democrats, one of the oldest capitalist political parties in the world. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) are pulling out all the stops to convince educators that the only way to fight Trump is to elect a Democrat in November 2020.

They are joined by Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other supposed “progressive” Democrats who claim the party will fight the corporate dictatorship over economic and political life.

What is the real record of the Democratic Party?

The Obama administration bailed out Wall Street and oversaw the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top in US history while continuing the unending wars. He cut Title I and special education, and used Race-to-the-Top funds to push merit pay and vastly expand charter schools. Meanwhile, fellow Democrats in California, Illinois, New York and other states have slashed funding, starving education on the state and local levels.

Falsely claiming that the Democrats are the “lesser of two evils,” the unions funnel millions of teachers’ dues to Democrats. In return, the Democrats rely on the unions to suppress strikes and popular opposition to budget cutting. This arrangement provides “seats at the table” for highly paid union officials like AFT President Randi Weingarten, whose 2018 salary was \$514,144, or nearly 10 times the average pay of a Michigan teacher.

Over the past two years as teachers rallied and walked out from coast to coast, an army of AFT and NEA officials crisscrossed the country to isolate each struggle and prevent strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky and other states from coalescing into a nationwide strike. Weingarten, Lily García & Co. correctly feared that such a powerful struggle would encourage ever wider sections of the working class and challenge the prerogatives of the corporate and financial oligarchy that rules America and the world.

Trump’s billionaire education secretary, Betsy DeVos, epitomizes the avarice and anti-social character of the ruling class. She wants an entirely class-driven model of education: for the rich, no expense is spared; for the working class, only bare literacy and a lifetime of menial labor.

Trump must be fought. But to do so the working class must mobilize independently of both big business parties and the capitalist system they defend. Teachers, young people and students should build new organizations of struggle—workplace, factory and neighborhood committees controlled by rank-and-file workers themselves—to build up a powerful industrial and political counteroffensive of the whole working class.

Such a movement must fight for what working people need, not what the big business politicians claim is affordable. This includes a massive infusion of resources

to drastically improve public education and the livelihoods of teachers and other school employees.

Teachers know that the crisis in the classrooms cannot be fixed without ending poverty and class society. They are constantly told there is “no money” for schools when three individuals in the US have more wealth than the bottom 160 million people. Trillions are squandered on war, attacks on immigrant workers and endless tax cuts to the rich, delivered by Republicans and Democrats.

The fight for public education requires a frontal assault on the ill-gotten wealth of the capitalist elite. It means a fight to establish socialism, a society based on social need, not private profit, in which the wealth produced by workers is owned and controlled democratically, and in which every individual has the right to a high quality education, a decent job, a livable income, health care, a healthy environment, and access to culture. It means the international unity and collaboration of working people around the world and an end to the danger of fascism and world war.

Struggles of educators are heating up in Chicago, Las Vegas, throughout Washington state and in districts across the US. Currently, 20,000 AT&T workers are on strike in the South and autoworkers are set to join the battle. Amazon workers, hospital workers and all other sections of the working class—in the US and internationally—are saying, “enough is enough.”

We urge educators to join the Socialist Equality Party in the fight to build a new socialist leadership among teachers and throughout the working class internationally.



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