

As states plan billions in budget cuts to schools

Pseudo-lefts ask: “What is the least we can accept?”

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On April 22, Haymarket Books hosted an online event entitled “Remaking Schools in the Time of Coronavirus.” Additionally sponsored by New Press and *Rethinking Schools*, the webinar was attended by up to 1,500 people. The speakers were Seattle Public Schools ethnic studies teacher Jesse Hagopian, Cornell professor Noliwe Rooks and University of Washington Bothell professor Wayne Au.

It would be an understatement to describe the event as irresponsibly complacent. The forum was thoroughly indifferent and hostile to the fate of public education, the plight of education workers and students, while peddling divisive identity politics and support to the big-business Democratic Party.

“Remaking Schools” largely ignored the unprecedented—in fact existential—budget cuts facing education. To the extent that the speakers addressed the cuts, the collective wisdom of the group was spelled out in craven fashion by panelist Noliwe Rooks who posed the problem as “What is the least we can accept?”

School districts across the US are beginning to announce massive budgetary shortfalls as they confront the transition to online learning, providing laptops or other devices to students, and maintain feeding programs. These measures, while horrific, will be only a down payment as workers and young people are forced to bear the economic brunt of the ongoing bailout of Wall Street. On April 16, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced plans to cut \$827 million from the city’s education department next year.

Any teachers who may have mistakenly hoped the Haymarket broadcast would put forward a fighting program in defense of public education would have been sorely disappointed. The pseudo-left academics made clear not only that they accept the inevitability of massive cuts, school closures and privatization, but—loyal union supporters that they are—simply asked to be “consulted” in the process. This reactionary pro-capitalist outlook was unsurprisingly combined with the promotion of the right-wing Democratic candidate for president, Joe Biden.

Despite the phony “socialist” pretensions of the webinar participants, this pro-capitalist stance is par for the course. A longtime union hack, Hagopian heads the Social Equity Educators caucus of the Seattle Education Association and played a despicable role in the betrayals of teachers’ struggles in 2015 and 2018. A former member of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO), Hagopian is an editor of *Rethinking Schools*

magazine along with Au. Both have been spokesmen at Haymarket’s Socialism Conference. Haymarket Books has operated a conduit of financing from the Democratic Party to the ISO and the pseudo-left ensconced within academia. Rooks, a professor at Cornell, has marketed herself as a black, female “expert” on race-based theories of public education.

Of course, educators should be very concerned that the ruling class is planning to drastically “remake” education. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, state tax revenues are anticipated to fall by \$500 billion over the next three years as a result of necessary measures taken to halt the spread of COVID-19. In two announcements characteristic of the deep-going measures being adopted nationally, the governor of Hawaii plans to cut teacher pay by 20 percent and the Kentucky state senate has voted to withhold teacher pension funding if educators do not agree to cuts in retirement benefits.

When the overt crisis in New York City came up for discussion, Rooks acknowledged the state is “looking at 50 percent in cuts” and, “I’m hearing that story all over the country.” But, signaling her terms, she said, “given that,” we just “can’t do what we did before.” She elaborated, “If you are going to consolidate schools, moving teachers around and coming up with experimental techniques,” then you need, she explained, “folks from the community at the table.” Addressing herself to “union members, teachers, activists,” Rooks said, “Now is the time to figure out, what is the least we can accept. ... what will we lay our bodies in front of to keep from happening.”

Denying the terrible effect such cuts will have on the entire working class, Rooks concluded by promoting her role as spokeswoman for various identities, concluding, “we know the kids that will get the short end.”

For his part, Hagopian introduced the idea that the current situation is a textbook example of Naomi Klein’s “shock doctrine,” in which “billionaires exploit moments of crisis to further line their pockets.” But none of the panelists addressed the ongoing bailout of Wall Street to the tune of trillions of dollars or contrasted this endless enrichment of the elite to the mantra that there is “no money” for schools.

To do so would cut across their support for the unions and the Democrats. The recent Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, supported by the Democratic Party,

including former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders and DSA member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, allocated a mere \$30.75 billion for education, or 0.122 percent. Further, a substantial amount of this funding is being made available through block grants, allowing states substantial “flexibility” in spending these funds, including on charter schools and private and religious schools, or even to shore up other areas of their budgets.

Instead, Rooks expressed gratitude “that this did not happen about 10 years ago, when it seemed to me the privatization movement was riding a little higher than maybe it is now.” Expressing uncritical support for the Democratic Party, Rooks continued, saying “Joe Biden has said very clearly, I think we need to be putting more money into traditional public schools, and not necessarily talking about the charter schools as much, or privatization as much or vouchers as much. About 10 years ago that was not the narrative. This happening then, I think we would have an organized movement for privatizing everything.” Indicating once again that she preaches advocating for “the least” possible, she promotes Biden for not advocating privatization “as much” as Trump!

Hagopian and Au agreed with this sentiment, with Au saying, “This would have been much scarier than it is now,” and Hagopian adding, “Had this happened a decade ago when they were just gaining steam for all their corporate education reforms, we would have been in real trouble.” The pseudo-lefts, of course, deliberately cover over the fact that it was the Obama-Biden administration that spearheaded the privatization drive 10 years ago. Further, Wall Street’s current plans for rationing education, including vastly expanding and profiting from online learning, are being ramped up.

Hagopian further falsified the struggles of the last two years, claiming, “Over the last 10 years, we’ve built a massive resistance to that shock doctrine. We’ve actually had incredible victories.” Hagopian cited the worn-out lie that teachers’ strikes resulted in “incredible victories,” claiming inroads against high-stakes testing and support to undocumented students.

This amounts to a cynical cover-up for the role of the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers in betraying the struggles of teachers which arose largely independently of and in opposition to the unions. As the WSWs has extensively reported in the course of these teacher strikes, the unions were instrumental in shutting down the strike wave and pushing through sell-out agreements that failed to address the decades of defunding of public schools. This was done in cities like Chicago and Seattle in the name of “social justice unionism,” which accepted school closings and poverty pay in exchange for more ethnic studies and phony promises that have not been kept.

The only real demand expressed by these figures is that “community members”—by which they mean trade union bureaucrats and pseudo-left academics like themselves—be involved in deciding what gets cut and how education is restructured in the future.

This fact was underscored when the group discussed a *New York Times* editorial that noted, “A learning reversal of this magnitude could hobble an entire generation,” the speakers appeared nonplussed. Au said, “Part of me is sympathetic to that. Part of me

also isn’t, in the sense that, we’re already dealing with a system that was focusing almost solely on tested subjects. So, it was this hyper focus on a particular kind of academics that I don’t think was particularly healthy for our students.

“Not that I’m opposed to folks learning about how to do math, or to read critically, or to write, so don’t get that twisted, but it’s more about what is this whole focus on these very rigid notions of curriculum and things that are focused mainly on passing the test. What does that do to the quality of education overall?” In this postmodernist vein, Au continued, “Some things might be lost, but there’s also going to be some things gained. ... What do we feel like is important for us as communities and as people to learn about and be with in terms of knowledge in this world?”

Educators, students and parents must reject the bankrupt perspective of this anti-socialist cabal of self-seeking, well-heeled pseudo-lefts. “Rethinking Education” has performed a service. It has once again exposed the pseudo-left and practitioners of identity politics as unapologetic advocates of capitalism. Teachers should have nothing but scorn for those such as Hagopian, Au and Rooks, who preach capitulation to the bipartisan attempts to destroy public education.

The WSWs *Teacher Newsletter* urges all educators to assimilate the lessons of the fight against the pseudo-left and begin the struggle to form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and the two political parties of big business. Only a socialist policy can insure that children can be educated and provided with a future. The vast wealth squandered on Wall Street and the military must be seized and redirected to fund all the social needs of the working class, including halting the pandemic and providing universal access to high quality public education.



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