

US school districts posture as opponents of militarized schools

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In response to the mass protests against police violence across the US and internationally in the wake of police murder of George Floyd, various local teacher union leaders and other pseudo-left advocates of “defunding the police” have pressured school districts to take up the issue of policing in public schools. Although some districts, including Minneapolis, have voted to end their contracts with local police or “disband” their school police forces, absent a struggle for genuine socialism the measures will do nothing to end the militarization of schools or repressive violence aimed at students.

One of the most prominent of these actions was the June 2 vote by the Minneapolis Board of Education to end the district’s contract with the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD), whose officers were responsible for Floyd’s murder. The Minneapolis school district has been paying \$1.1 million per year for these “services,” and many school districts have similar financial arrangements that effectively subsidize the police with school funds.

Despite the seemingly radical move, MPD deputy chief Erick Fors assured CNN that police would continue to “work in cooperation with the Minneapolis Public Schools regarding safety and security issues.”

Superintendent Ed Graff is required to present a new school safety and security plan for the district by August 8, and all indications are that the police will simply be replaced by alternative security guards. Even Eric Moore, the district’s chief of accountability, research and equity, noted, “You’ve eliminated the SRO position, but you still have to have [security positions] at the schools.”

In other words, aside from an accounting change, very little will actually change in the schools. Police will still regularly enter schools to arrest students. Instead of walking down the hall, they will simply be called in by the district’s own security force, who may well be armed themselves.

Another example of the fraudulent and almost

meaningless nature of these “reforms” can be seen in Denver, where the school board voted unanimously on June 11 to end its \$720,000 contract with local police. Under the plan, 17 officers assigned to schools would be phased out over 18 months. Four will be gone by the end of the year, with the rest eliminated by mid-2021. However, the district’s own much larger force of 100 armed and unarmed security guards will be left in place.

In Seattle, which intends to merely suspend the on-campus presence of police for one year, Seattle Police Department officers “will not be present on our campuses except in emergencies,” according to school superintendent Denise Juneau. Since nearly all violent encounters between police and students on campus would likely qualify as “emergencies,” it’s clear that the resolution is all but meaningless.

The school board in Oakland, California is set to vote June 24 on a resolution that would eliminate the Oakland Schools Police Department, officially part of the school district itself. Already supported by a majority of the board, the measure would cut 10 officers and police administrators and redirect the \$2.5 million spent on police toward student support services and restorative justice coordinators, vastly less than what is required to provide adequate services for students in the district.

Like other districts contemplating these kinds of plans, Oakland schools will present an alternative “safety plan” by December 31. According to board member Roseann Torres, the plan could include increased use of security cameras and locks on doors.

Other districts around the country are also seeing school board members and local politicians propose similar resolutions. One proposal for Los Angeles would eliminate the school police department over four years. Like Oakland, Los Angeles schools have their own police force of 344 armed and 95 unarmed officers.

In Chicago, a city council ordinance calling for Chicago

Public Schools (CPS) to cut ties with the Chicago police was defeated, despite being backed by 13 aldermen and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). Mayor Lori Lightfoot's most recent budget touted that the city was paid \$33 million from the CPS budget for CPD officers.

Using a parliamentary maneuver, alderman Chris Taliaferro, a former policeman, was able to delay any consideration of the ordinance until at least September. For her part, Lightfoot has opposed the proposal, saying, "Yeah we're not gonna do that," and "Unfortunately, we need security in our schools."

In the United States, practically every school system has some kind of relationship or another with local police forces, with cops assigned to schools often designated as "school resource officers" (SROs). According to a 2016 report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a government agency, 42.9 percent of all public schools have police officers that are "routinely" armed. This jumps dramatically to 70.9 percent in the case of public secondary schools, although even 30 percent of public primary schools have armed police officers.

While police officers are broadly distributed throughout public schools, they are especially prominent in working class neighborhoods with lower incomes. According to the NCES report, 49 percent of schools with 50-75 percent of students receiving free or reduced priced lunch, a proxy for poverty and low income, have armed officers, compared with 42.5 percent of schools with the lowest percentage of low-income students.

Coinciding with the militarization of schools, resources for students have been largely cut or eliminated. According to a 2019 ACLU report, over 90 percent of schools do not meet the 1:250 counselor-to-student ratio recommended by professional standards and the US Public Health Service. The report went on to note there are 1.7 million students in the US who attend schools where there are police on campus but no counselors at all. There are 6 million students attending schools where police are present but not a single school psychologist is employed, and 10 million students who have police in their schools but not a single social worker.

As in the rest of society more broadly, the increase in the presence of police on school campuses, along with security cameras, metal detectors and other police state measures, have corresponded both with the drastic increase in social inequality and the eruption of American imperialism over the past three decades.

While the anger at police violence and the militarization of schools is widely popular and wholly justified, the

claims by the pseudo-left that these measures to disband or defund the police represent victories against racism or the carceral state is a complete fantasy. On the contrary, it is clear these proposals are largely meant to defuse social anger at police violence, while allowing cities and school boards to posture as sympathetic with these popular moods. The vast repressive apparatus of the state is kept largely intact, albeit with a few additional positions for restorative justice coordinators.

Meagan Day's piece in *Jacobin*, "Teachers' Unions Are Demanding Police-Free Schools," is emblematic of this approach. An extended endorsement of the "social movement unionism," practiced by such unions as the CTU and United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), Day's hagiographic account of the teacher unions' "successes" in hiring social justice coordinators and other minor measures leaves out entirely how the unions have used these measures to cover for mass layoffs, school closures and other cuts.

Contra Day and others in the pseudo-left, the only way police can be abolished is through the abolition of the capitalist state, which is an instrument for the suppression of the entire working class. The key question is turning students and educators to the broader working class in a struggle for socialism, to fully fund public education and all the social needs of workers. Only through such a program can the police be abolished in every school and every city.



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