Bipartisan assault on US public education intensifies amid COVID-19 pandemic

Alberto Escalera
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Several recently published reports have drawn attention to the unrelenting assault on public education being carried out by Republicans and Democrats across the United States. Under conditions of a deepening pandemic, which is exacerbating the broader economic and social crisis for the working class and poor, the bipartisan gutting of school district budgets across the US is projected to reach an unprecedented scale.

According to a recent Economic Policy Institute (EPI) study, K-12 districts across the US are facing a $1 trillion shortfall by the end of 2021. The sharp decline in state and local tax revenue comes in the aftermath of decades of systematic disinvestment in public education. State and local funding constitutes the majority source of K-12 public school budgets in the US.

While corporate profits quickly rebounded in the period following the Great Recession, surpassing 2008 levels by nearly 80 percent within six years according to many conservative estimates, spending on public education was consistently slashed during the same period under the Obama administrations. Average state and local funding for public education only returned to 2008 levels in 2016 and remained flat from that year until the onset of the pandemic. The Center for American Progress estimates that near-term state and local spending on education will drop as much as 50 percent due to the pandemic.

The further evisceration of state and local budgets for education will have a devastating impact on education workers and public school students alike.

Recent Bureau of Labor Department data reveals that nearly 1 million K-12 education jobs were cut during the first four months after the onset of the pandemic. Another 350,000 education jobs were slashed this past September alone. The mass layoffs in public education, which are aggravating residual staffing shortages stemming from pre-pandemic layoffs, are taking place amid a general rise in K-12 student enrollment across the US.

In addition to job cuts, the decades-long, bipartisan effort to drive down wages among education workers has continued full force. A Southern Regional Education Board study published in September details how average teacher salaries across the US have sunk so low that mid-career educators in 38 states, both Democrat and Republican-led, qualify for federal assistance programs such as food stamps. One out of five teachers in the US is forced to take on a second job to make ends meet.

Massive job cuts, stagnant wages and worsening school conditions, including increased classroom overcrowding, crumbling school infrastructure, as well as antiquated and inadequate instructional materials, form the objective conditions that have compelled teachers across the US to engage in an ongoing series of strikes since the February 2018 statewide wildcat strike by West Virginia teachers.

Despite the initiative and courage of rank-and-file educators, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA) and their state and local affiliates have continuously worked to isolate and wear down striking teachers in an effort to subordinate their struggle to the Democratic Party, which has played an equally active role in gutting education.

Significantly, many of the education jobs that are being eliminated are concentrated among special education teachers, teacher assistants and other support staff, guidance counselors and school nurses. Reduced staffing in these areas has been shown to aggravate the negative impact of cuts to education for those students most in need of support. Additionally, school districts across the country are slashing enrichment programs in areas such as arts and foreign language study.

The response to the deepening crisis in education from both major parties has been to further shift the burden of the catastrophe onto the backs of the working class while seeking to ensure that the obscene accumulation of wealth by the ruling oligarchy continues uninterrupted. While the precipitous decline in tax revenue owing to the pandemic has impacted all 50 states across the US, it is particularly illustrative to examine how areas under Democratic administrations are using budget deficits to further weaken

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public education.

In New York state, Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo has cynically sought to use the pandemic to build a national profile for himself by feigning opposition to Trump, while repeatedly rejecting even modest proposals to increase taxes on the wealthy to address an estimated $14.5 billion budget deficit. In the midst of the pandemic, Cuomo is withholding 20 percent of state K-12 education funding, resulting in a combination of draconian cuts and ballooning indebtedness in local school districts.

The Schenectady City School District, located in the Mohawk Valley roughly three hours from New York City, relies on state aid for nearly 70 percent of its operating budget. Due to Cuomo's withholding of funding, the district was recently forced to eliminate 400 positions, including 79 teachers, 14 social workers and 231 paraprofessionals.

Even before the pandemic, school district debt in New York averaged $9,267 per student, compared to $8,500 per capita for the US as a whole. Currently, the total debt of school districts in the US amounts to just under $500 billion.

In New York City, Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio has used a $9 billion municipal budget deficit to cut over $700 million in education spending for the current year. Rather than encroach even minimally upon the obscene levels of wealth accumulated by the financial oligarchy on Wall Street, the self-styled "progressive" Democrat has resorted to austerity measures such as layoffs, wage cuts, the slashing of programs and a new municipal bond issue.

After weeks of threatening to lay off 9,000 education workers, de Blasio, with the connivance of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), used the budget crisis to carry out a brazen act of wage theft by reneging on $450 million in deferred wages owed to city teachers from 2009–2011. At the same time, de Blasio and other city Democrats have stepped up lobbying efforts to convince state lawmakers to allow the city to issue $5 billion in new municipal debt, for which working class residents of the city will be made to pay to the financial oligarchy.

In California, where years of defunding education has resulted in some of the highest class sizes and fewest numbers of guidance counselors per capita in the country, as well as drastic reductions in course offerings and other student supports, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom recently signed a budget that essentially guarantees the long-term indebtedness of local school districts.

After reducing the current education budget by $10 billion from the previous year, the state is deferring over $12 billion in K-12 funding to local school districts. In order to cover short-term expenses, local districts are now being forced to issue municipal bonds on the off-chance that a new federal stimulus package will allow the state to make up for withheld funding in the spring.

Even if a new federal stimulus package makes its way through Congress, by no means a foregone conclusion even under a Biden presidency, the scale of education funding is likely to fall significantly short of even the most conservative estimates of what is required to stabilize local school districts.

The multitrillion-dollar CARES Act—which was passed with unprecedented speed on a bipartisan basis last March in order to prop up the stock market—allocated a paltry $16.5 billion in total education funding. Subsequent legislative proposals to provide funding for modest relief measures, including direct assistance to workers and the poor as well as education aid to states, have been met with bipartisan indifference.

There is no section of the ruling elite capable of resolving the education crisis or any of the fundamental social or economic problems facing the broad masses. The bipartisan campaign to use the pandemic in order to further dismantle K-12 public education underscores the hypocrisy behind all of the current claims that the back-to-school drive is intended to address the needs of children.

The herding of school-aged children and teachers back into understaffed and insufficiently resourced school buildings as the deadly coronavirus is allowed to "rip through the population" is perhaps the clearest testimonial of the criminal indifference that characterizes the capitalist class.

Yet, a growing number of education workers, along with working class parents and youth, are taking up the struggle to oppose the decades-long bipartisan attack on public education and the homicidal policy of unsafe school reopenings. Education workers across the US and internationally are forming rank-and-file safety committees to fight for safe working conditions amid the deadly pandemic as well as the right of working-class youth to a quality education and culture.

We urge all educators, parents and students in the US who oppose the deadly reopening of schools and support the universal right to free, high quality education to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today. We will work with you to form a rank-and-file committee in your district, as part of a growing network of committees across the US and internationally dedicated to the fight for public education and the health and safety of the working class.

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