

US teachers union “lefts” pen love letter to Biden

Rena Cassimeda, Evan Blake
15 December 2020

More than a dozen local teachers union officials, including the supposedly “left” union presidents in Chicago, Los Angeles and Oakland, have penned a groveling letter to President-elect Joe Biden. In the most sycophantic manner, the letter writers congratulate Biden, endorse his plan to reopen schools amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic, and beg the president-elect to appoint a Secretary of Education who will embrace their brand of racist and identity politics.

The three-page letter echoes Biden’s lying claim that teachers will have one of their own in the White House because his wife is a National Education Association (NEA) member and community college professor. Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris are presented as the saviors of public education who will be the polar opposites of the despised Trump administration and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos.

“When you called Chicago Teachers Union President Jesse Sharkey on the picket line during an historic 11-day strike in 2019,” they write, “one of the first things you said to brave educators was, ‘Teaching is not what you do; it’s who you are.’ It’s a phrase you’ve repeated often throughout your campaign, and the recognition of that fact—and your value of our profession—is what separates you from your predecessor in the White House.”

“Teachers across the country cheered when you stood on the debate stage and called for more funding for our schools, better ventilated buildings, smaller class sizes and increased educator staffing,” the writers claim. “Your message of having one of our own in the White House during your acceptance speech gave us hope in light of the past four years, which have been, quite frankly, a malicious, sustained attack on public education from the federal government.”

All of the signers know that Biden is a vicious enemy of the working class and of teachers in particular. He has pledged to reopen most schools in the US in his first 100 days in office, a move that would produce an even more catastrophic surge in COVID-19 infections and deaths. A faithful servant of Wall Street, Biden is committed to a brutal program of austerity and the deepening of the decades-long efforts to privatize public education, which were vastly expanded under the Obama-Biden administration from 2009 to 2016. But none of this stops them from falsely claiming that the Democratic president will champion the interests of teachers and public education.

All of those who signed are implicated in the most miserable betrayals of teachers over the last several years. This includes Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) President Jesse Sharkey, a leader of the now defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO), who sold out strikes in 2019 and 2012, paving the way for the Democratic political establishment to close scores of public schools, lay off thousands of teachers and expand for-profit charter schools.

Also signing were United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) President Cecily Myart-Cruz, who along with then-union president Alex Caputo-Pearl, sold out the 2019 strike by 33,000 Los Angeles educators; and Oakland Education Association (OEA) President Keith Brown, who ended

a strike shortly afterwards by reaching a quid pro quo with the Democratic Party predicated on massive austerity and school closures.

Other signers include Arizona Educators United (AEU) Facebook group administrator Rebecca Garelli, who along with Noah Karvelis worked with the Arizona Education Association (AEA) and the Democrats to put down the rebellion of Arizona teachers in 2018. Other signers are from teachers unions in Philadelphia, Boston and Baltimore who are associated with the promotion of the racist curriculum backed by Black Lives Matter at School.

“Union locals in our coalition have gone on strike for the common good, where rank-and-file members used their power to fight for issues beyond just wages and benefits,” they write. In each and every case, however, the various “social justice” demands they obtained, which were largely associated with racial and identity politics, were only a camouflage for the abandonment of teachers’ most fundamental demands for an end to brutal austerity, school closures and privatization.

Pseudo-lefts support Biden’s plan to open schools

With the pandemic raging out of control, the letter echoes the fraud promoted by Biden and the Democrats and the teachers unions that schools can be reopened “safely” as long as school officials work closely with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA).

“We welcome your commitment to seeing our country through this crisis safely, and the next secretary of education must share that same commitment to ensuring the safety of our schools and protection of students and educators,” the letter declares. There is no such thing as a “safe reopening” of schools until the pandemic is fully under control. According to The COVID Monitor, to date there have been 363,791 reported COVID-19 cases among students and staff in K-12 schools, numbers constantly rising and likely much higher due to the concealment of data across the country regarding cases, deaths and outbreaks tied to public schools.

The letter was published the day after the fascistic police raid on the home of whistleblower Rebekah Jones, the co-founder of The COVID Monitor, yet the signers—like Biden himself—say nothing about this assault on free speech and access to information. Nor does the deaths of hundreds of educators, school employees and students throughout the country during the pandemic merit a mention in their love letter to Biden.

Since winning the election, Biden has been steadfast in assuring Wall Street that there will be no national lockdowns and that opening schools will be one of his top priorities during the first 100 days of his administration. Far from defending the lives of educators and students, the pseudo-left elements in the unions are offering their support to Biden’s

back-to-school policy. This is in line with the support for the homicidal “herd immunity” policy by *Jacobin* magazine, the semi-official publication of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which regularly promotes these supposed “left” union leaders.

The toxic promotion of racialist politics

The bulk of the letter serves to promote divisive racialist politics, in line with the platform of the Democratic Party. The letter attempts to obscure the fact that tens of millions of working-class and middle-class students and education staff of all races face dire conditions as a result of the ruling class response to the pandemic. Instead, the pandemic and the economic and social crisis are presented in racial terms.

“COVID-19 has also laid bare vast inequities in our society, to the detriment of a disproportionately Black and Latinx student population. Racial capitalism is incompatible with justice for our students. We cannot have a discussion about reopening schools without discussing a broader set of demands that reflect **new commitments to Black and Brown lives**” (emphasis in original). The writers also call on the Department of Education to provide “funding for increased educators of color.”

This promotion of racial politics serves three interrelated purposes. First, it is meant to conceal the fact that the decimation of public education and the criminal response of the ruling class to the pandemic are *class*, not racial, questions. Second, it is aimed at dividing educators and parents and facilitating the continued attack on public education by both corporate-controlled parties, with the connivance of the unions. Finally, racialist politics are used to promote the careers of various upper middle-class layers of minorities, women, etc. who want to be in charge of textbook and curriculum deals and other business opportunities opened up by the privatization of public education.

The promotion of such politics has nothing to do with socialism or the fight for the expansion of public education and other democratic rights. On the contrary, racialist politics has been fully adopted by the capitalist class. This can be seen in the “rainbow coalition” of bankers, war criminals and other reactionaries in Biden’s cabinet. Whether they are black or white, men or women, gay or straight, the Biden administration, including the next secretary of education, will serve the interests of the corporate rulers.

Following the 2008 financial collapse and bailout of Wall Street, Biden helped oversee a massive onslaught on public education under the Obama administration. This included the layoffs of hundreds of thousands of public school employees and the hated “Race to the Top” program, which gave cash-starved districts financial incentives to implement merit pay, the expansion of charter schools and punitive, standardized test-based teacher “accountability” schemes, which scapegoated teachers for the educational problems produced by decades of budget-cutting.

The crisis of public education is not caused by “racial capitalism,” but by capitalism, a system that subordinates every aspect of life to the ever-greater enrichment of the corporate and financial oligarchy. Both parties have overseen a decades-long transfer of wealth from the working class to the super-rich. After Congress handed trillions more to Wall Street with the bipartisan CARES Act, Biden has been tasked with starving public education and other vital social services to pay for this unprecedented corporate bailout.

Whatever the phony claims of the letter writers about Biden and Harris, they will consistently seek to compromise with their Republican “colleagues” who have conspired with Trump to overturn the election results. Biden will join with Mitch McConnell and the Republicans to declare there is no money for schools and to herd teachers and children

back into infected schools so parents can be forced back to work to produce corporate profit.

Having worked closely with the AFT and NEA to prevent the wave of strikes in 2018-19 from coalescing into a nationwide strike, the letter signers are excited by the prospect that Biden might pick AFT President Randi Weingarten or former NEA President Lily Eskelsen García as his education secretary. This, they hope, would increase their chances of obtaining lucrative positions in the Biden administration as it imposes its anti-teacher measures.

But the back-to-school drive and savage austerity will produce a powerful response from educators against the Democratic Party and the corporatist unions, which will go far beyond the teacher strikes of 2018-19. For these struggles to succeed, however, new organizations of struggle and a new perspective are needed.

Educators have already begun to take up the call by the Socialist Equality Party and the *WSWS Educators Newsletter* to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions. This is crucial to unite with other sections of the working class to build a powerful movement to demand the closure of the schools and all nonessential production until the pandemic is under control, while guaranteeing full income to all affected workers, and providing the necessary resources for high-quality remote learning.

This must be combined with a new political strategy, including a complete break from the Democratic Party and capitalist politics. The solution to the crisis is not a redistribution of wealth between races—a reactionary pro-capitalist program peddled by the pseudo-left signers of the letter to Biden—but between classes. The fight for the full funding of public education requires the fight for socialism. This includes the expropriation of the private fortunes of the pandemic profiteers like the billionaires Bezos, Musk and Tyson, and the redirection of the trillions squandered on corporate bailouts and the Pentagon war budget to vastly improve public education and other vital social programs.

To fight for this, we urge educators to join and build the Socialist Equality Party to lead these historic struggles that lie ahead.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact