

Reject the racist renaming of San Francisco public schools!

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Abraham Lincoln High School, Thomas Jefferson High School, James Madison Campus and George Washington High School, among many others, have been placed on a hit list of 44 school sites in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) that must change their names on the basis of racist politics and historical falsification.

The effort is the culmination of a 2018 San Francisco Board of Education (SFBOE) resolution to rename schools. The SFUSD school names advisory committee, a board appointed group of district officials, educators, and “social justice” activists, will present a finalized list of name changes and suggested alternatives to the school board for approval later this month.

The WSWs condemns the SFBOE’s move to rename schools and calls on workers and youth to reject the attacks on Lincoln and the Founding Fathers. Erasing the names of Lincoln, Jefferson, Madison and Washington from the district is a deeply reactionary attack on the monumental legacies of these four historical figures, as well as the revolutionary character of the American Revolution and Civil War. Based on falsifying history, the entire initiative obscures the politics and class character of all the figures on the list for removal as well as the names chosen to take their places.

According to the race-focused criteria for renaming schools, the Great Emancipator and leaders of the American Revolution are cast aside as social pariahs. Though the committee’s criteria explicitly state that they will change the names of schools that honor “those who exploit workers/people,” staunch capitalist politicians who fall in line with the committee’s racist politics will keep their names on schools in the district. This includes: A.P. Giannini, Bank of America founder and financial pillar of the San Francisco ruling elite; Philip Burton, a Democratic congressman renowned for his skill at gerrymandering and political mentor to Nancy Pelosi; and Willie L. Brown, first African-American mayor of San Francisco and political patron to Vice President-elect Kamala Harris and California Governor Gavin Newsom.

The board officials and committee members in charge of renaming schools are enemies of the working class who fully accept the exploitation of workers and youth under capitalism. Their interests lie in a regressive and right-wing political campaign to imbue the district with racist policies and pedagogy and promote trusted defenders of capitalism who happen to be people of color into positions of power within the upper echelons of society.

Reflecting this perspective, Jeremiah Jeffries, chairman of the

school names advisory committee and teacher in SFUSD, revealed his contempt for Lincoln in a recent interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, in which he claimed: “Regardless of the pop culture myths of Lincoln and his motivations, the Civil War was not fought over slavery or the liberation of Black people.” And further: “Lincoln, like the presidents before him and most after, did not show through policy or rhetoric that Black lives ever mattered to them outside of human capital and as casualties of wealth building.”

Such an ignorant and reactionary assault on Lincoln is not original, but represents the historical falsification and racist political agenda promoted in the New York Times 1619 Project. The *Times*’ distortion of history slandered as a mere racist the president martyred for leading a revolutionary Civil War to end chattel slavery in the United States. The 1619 Project has been thoroughly exposed and discredited by the campaign spearheaded by the WSWs, which attracted the support of many of the most important historians of the American Revolution and Civil War.

The SFUSD committee has attacked Lincoln as responsible for “discriminatory and damaging policies, like placing Indians on reservations,” citing “the Dakota 38+2, largest mass hanging in US history.” As the WSWs thoroughly explained in its essay on Lincoln and the Dakota 38, this tragic event was also the largest act of executive clemency, in which Lincoln saved 265 Dakota men from the gallows, reflecting a level of humanity and a break in the line of presidents before and after him regarding Native American relations and policy.

In its 2018 resolution to rename schools, the SFBOE argues for removing names of historical figures who “significantly diminished the opportunities of those amongst us *to the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness* ...” (emphasis added). Though the board references the immortal words of the Declaration of Independence, which have influenced countless struggles for equality since the American Revolution, its very author, Thomas Jefferson, is on the list of school names to be removed! Jefferson, alongside his fellow contemporaries and revolutionists James Madison and George Washington, have been added to the school names removal list for having owned slaves.

Notably, as a young lawyer in the 1770s, Jefferson defended enslaved people in freedom suits, most famously in *Howell vs. Netherland*, in which he made a profound case that slavery was indeed a violation against the law of nature. His views on slavery would culminate in his banning of the international slave trade in

the entire United States as president in 1808.

Jefferson, Madison and Washington were among the vanguard of progressive bourgeois thought in the early development of the United States and contributed to immense strides in human progress. Deeply impacted by the ideals of the Enlightenment, these historical giants would maintain a lifelong commitment to legal equality and opposition to tyranny and oppression. Such views, made universal in the Declaration of Independence, called into question for the first time the institution of slavery in the United States. Though born into Virginia's planter class, inheriting land and slaves, all three figures would come to oppose slavery and support gradual emancipation. Ultimately, it required the revolutionary violence of the Civil War to accomplish this in 1865.

These modern-day censors write off great revolutionary figures in the name of "social justice." Torn from their historical context, the Founding Fathers and Lincoln are subject to the most base and flippant criticism, their legacies written off in a few words on a Google spreadsheet.

This same racist ideology was the basis for a 2019 SFBOE initiative to remove the Depression era George Washington murals at George Washington High School. Overwhelming opposition to the board decision saved the murals from destruction, with parents, alumni, historians, and community members expressing deep hostility toward such overt censorship of speech and artistic expression, as well as slanders against Washington. Adding Washington to the current list of names means the board will deepen its attempt to expunge all traces of the revolutionists from the district.

The hodge-podge character of the list of school names set for removal undercores the political aim of papering over fundamental class issues. For instance, current Democratic member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Diane Feinstein, is on the list for removal, supposedly because her office replaced a vandalized Confederate flag at City Hall while she was mayor of San Francisco in 1984.

The SFUSD school names advisory committee has nothing to say about Feinstein's long support of US imperialist war crimes on the US Senate Intelligence Committee, where she has also overseen illegal spying on the population and tolerated torture, nor that she is a longtime defender of the financial elite, most recently personally benefiting financially from insider knowledge of the threat of COVID-19. None of these facts are mentioned by the school names committee because its intentions lie in gaining admission to the ruling class for a few more representatives of "diversity," not doing away with the class divisions in society.

In a recent interview with the *Chronicle*, Jeffries extends an olive branch to Feinstein, stating that "she is one of the few living examples on our list, so she still has time to dedicate the rest of her life to the upliftment of Black, First Nations and other people of color. She hasn't thus far, so her apology simply wasn't convincing." This is an invitation to get back into the good graces of Jeffries and his ilk if Feinstein focuses more on the elevation of this milieu into the circles of power in the Democratic Party.

In October 2019, Jeffries issued a "Social Justice Voter Guide" that was endorsed and published by the *San Francisco Bay View*

Black National Newspaper. In it, Jeffries called for San Francisco Mayor London Breed's reelection in 2020, primarily because she is an African-American woman. The voter guide states, "While some of her political relationships are problematic, she has elevated some amazing women and men of color into positions of power... Good and bad, she is the first Black woman mayor this city has produced, and she should be given the chance to do right by it or not."

Breed was one of several prominent elected African-American Democrats who endorsed billionaire Michael Bloomberg in the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries, a candidate who implemented a "stop-and-frisk" policing policy as mayor in New York that deliberately targeted minority youth. Breed's endorsement of such a candidate displays her interest in climbing the social ladder and maintaining the status quo.

Figures like Jeffries will cherry-pick what counts for racism or injustice whenever it suits their interests, but will just as easily turn a blind eye if it promotes a person of color from this petty-bourgeois milieu into a position of power, where all fundamentally agree to the exploitation of the working class.

While SFBOE signals its so-called commitment to "social justice," it supports the efforts by federal, state and local officials to reopen the schools as soon as possible amid a deadly pandemic and will simultaneously sign off on mass austerity measures that will have a devastating impact on educators, school workers and students of all identities.

These district officials and members of the SFUSD school names advisory committee deserve the scorn of the working class. They are wolves in sheeps' clothing. For the workers who have had to endure the endless hardships of the pandemic and face a "winter of death," the racial politics of this social layer and the Democratic Party stand thoroughly exposed as policies that uphold the interests of the system that is killing them.

The WSWs calls on workers and youth within SFUSD and beyond to fight against these racist attacks against Lincoln, Jefferson, Madison and Washington, and in defense of historical truth and democratic rights.



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