

Three San Francisco school board members recalled in special election

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Last Tuesday, San Francisco residents voted overwhelmingly to recall three of the seven members of the San Francisco Board of Education (SFBOE), removing board President Gabriela Lopez (with 75 percent supporting the recall), board Vice President Faauuga Moliga (72 percent) and board member Alison Collins (79 percent).

The recalled board members will officially be removed from office and replaced by mayoral appointments 10 days after the election is officially accepted by the Board of Supervisors, giving Democratic Mayor London Breed extraordinary power over the composition of the board. The newly appointed board members will likely take office as soon as mid-March.

The SFUSD school board members, all Democrats, have repeatedly attempted to implement race-based policies within the district, alienating large sections of the city's working class population. Such politics have only paved the way for the emergence of the right-wing recall campaign backed by Silicon Valley billionaires and pro-charter advocates with millions of dollars in funding. Mass disaffection at the choice between two right-wing options is reflected in the low turnout at 36 percent city-wide.

Democratic Party politicians are using the results of the recall election to justify a further lurch to the right, which supports gutting funding for public education and keeping schools open amid the ongoing dangers of the pandemic. On Sunday's *Meet the Press*, Breed responded to the recall by saying, "It was really about the frustration of the Board of Education doing their fundamental job. And that is to make sure that our children are getting educated, that they get back into the classroom. And that did not occur. They were focusing on other things that were clearly a distraction."

Breed's sentiments are in lockstep with the broader push at the state and federal levels to scrap all significant public health measures to contain the pandemic, particularly in classrooms. Last week Governor Gavin Newsom announced his plan to "live with the virus." On schools, the plan advocates "an ongoing transition away from quarantining students," adding that "students potentially exposed to COVID-19 can remain safely in-school." It warns parents to "prepare for the eventual change to universal school masking," which is expected to be announced on February 28.

Siva Raj, co-leader of the recall campaign, said, "We have a school board that talks nonstop about social justice but doesn't do the single most important thing that our school district needed the whole year (to fully reopen schools) because education loss is a more important public health concern for children." The concept of learning loss has been used by both the Biden and former Trump administrations as reason for reopening the schools amid the pandemic. For the ruling class the health of finance capital and the stock market is of greater

concern than mass infection and the deaths of thousands of children and their families.

The right-wing racialists on the school board capitulated entirely to this campaign of mass infection. Under immense pressure from teachers over unsafe conditions, SFUSD remained mostly remote until the United Educators of San Francisco (UESF) brokered a rotten deal with the school board to resume instruction while community transmission remained high in February last year.

As cases mounted during the Omicron surge, teachers took matters into their own hands, conducting a wildcat sickout to demand safer conditions including distance learning, but again the school board relied on the teachers union to isolate and demobilize the teachers.

Public health measures to contain and ultimately eliminate the pandemic, like mask mandates and distance learning, remain very popular despite the propaganda campaign demanding that workers learn to live with infection, illness and death. A recent poll out of UC Berkeley shows a plurality of California voters want mask mandates to persist into 2023 or later. Hostile to this popular sentiment among workers, the school board members relied on UESF to mount an opposition to the recall, but the school board's long record of racial obsession paved the way for widespread abstention.

In early 2021, the board attempted to rename 44 of the district's schools, or one-third of the total in the district. The attempt to rename schools named for revolutionary historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Paul Revere produced an onslaught of opposition from parents, community members and the public at large who criticized the process as flawed and lacking historical context.

There is nothing progressive about this thoroughly right-wing initiative to rename schools based on racial politics. The WSWS campaigned actively against these measures at the time and explained that the initiative was an attempt to deny the revolutionary and progressive nature of the American Revolution and the Civil War.

Prior to the pandemic in 2019, the board engaged in a censorship campaign against the 13-panel mural titled the *Life of Washington* at San Francisco's George Washington High School, which the WSWS also actively opposed. The murals, which WPA-era painter Victor Arnautoff intended as a damning critique of racism and colonialism, clearly depict the oppression of slaves and Native Americans and unflinchingly reveal the historical contradictions present at the founding of the United States. This was a reactionary, right-wing campaign to promote false concepts of race and gender as the fundamental categories of American society, to disorient and keep the public from recognizing class exploitation as the driving force of capitalism and actual source of social inequality and poverty. Aside

from the WSWS, no other political organization opposed this racist narrative from the left.

Significantly, former board member Collins, was stripped of her leadership position on the board when past Twitter comments resurfaced by recall proponent and Lowell graduate, Diane Yap, in which Collins accused Asian Americans of being anti-black and claimed they had internalized white supremacy, an absurd claim in San Francisco which bears a long history of anti-Asian racism, from the days of the railroads and Chinese Exclusion through Japanese American internment to the promotion of the Wuhan Lab conspiracy today. Collins responded by suing the district for \$87 million, costing the budget-strapped district some \$400,000 before it was dismissed by a judge.

Who was behind the recall?

The recall campaign was primarily driven by far-right opponents of public education, Silicon Valley billionaires and investors wanting to keep schools open so that workers can be forced back to unsafe workplaces to provide the surplus labor needed to keep profits flowing for Wall Street.

A school board race in San Francisco usually costs about \$40,000. This billionaire-backed campaign for the recall raised nearly \$2 million, an amount far higher than all the school board candidates together have raised over several prior years' elections. Deep-pocketed, right-wing donors shoveled money into the recall, while the mainstream media outlets exploited the discontent and frustration felt by the public, weaving it into a narrative about "parents' rights."

One of the top two financial donors of the recall campaign, Teach For America, is an organization that funnels untrained college students into teaching positions at rock-bottom salaries in the most desperate schools. Arthur Rock, the Silicon Valley-based billionaire and director of Teach For America, also supports the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Another of the recall campaign's biggest donors was Neighbors for a Better San Francisco Advocacy, a political action committee that has been funded by Silicon Valley-area tech investors. Among the other big donors of the recall were David O. Sacks, a San Francisco-based tech investor and former CEO of PayPal and the California Association of Realtors.

Recall used to centralize authority through creation of a new agency

The crises of the pandemic and the district's \$125 million budget shortfall were seized upon not only by the right-wing recall campaign but also by Mayor Breed, who saw this as an opportunity for carrying out a systemic restructuring of the school district.

As Siva Raj & Autumn Looijen, co-leaders of the recall campaign, tellingly put it, "By installing new board members appointed by Breed on the SFBE in time to choose the next superintendent, after Superintendent Vincent Matthews retires this summer, we plan to remake the upper levels of management so there will be leaders in

place that we can trust to manage the district's budget crisis."

To this end Breed recently introduced an oversight plan and ballot initiative called the Children's First Initiative, which would create a new city agency, the Children's Agency, to oversee all of the city's departments dealing with children and families and would also have control over the school board.

If the mayor's proposed amendment is approved by the Board of Supervisors, it will go before voters in June. If passed it would oversee both the Department of Early Childhood and the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) and would base city funding for schools on the behavior of the SFBOE. The amendment would give the mayor's office unprecedented power and control over San Francisco's public schools. Breed proclaimed at a press conference that "we have to get away from the system of 10 agencies serving families."

If Breed's ballot measure passes, her Children's Agency would be on par with the powerful Public Utilities Commission and the Municipal Transportation Agency. San Francisco schools could lose millions in city funding each year if school board members "misbehave," essentially forcing the school board to change how it operates and how members conduct themselves if they are to receive any discretionary funds. The school board would be required to submit an annual report verifying it has followed requirements and would have to go through special training in order to receive city funding.

Whatever Breed claims is the reason for her support of the recall and her proposed charter amendment, the real motivation behind these policies is to further slash funding for the city's public schools, children and family services, and to ensure that schools stay open no matter what the cost in the lives of San Francisco school children and their families may be due to the pandemic.

Every part of the government, from local city and county municipalities all the way up to the federal government, have now abandoned enforcing any measures for mitigating the spread of COVID-19. The Biden administration's relentless push to open public schools for in-person instruction for the purpose of keeping the economy running at all costs has been joined by state governors, counties and cities across the country in a frenzied push to save a decayed and rotting economy at the expense of hundreds of thousands of people's lives. This effort by the entire political establishment is most significantly expressed by California Governor Newsom's homicidal "endemic plan."

Educators, students and parents must recognize these latest maneuvers as yet another assault on public education and organize independent rank-and-file committees outside of both political parties and the sclerotic, corporatist trade unions. We call on teachers, parents, students and all workers in San Francisco and across the state of California to unite for the defense of safe public education, and to contact us today and join the Northern California Educators Rank-and-File Committee.



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