

As the new school year begins

The political issues in the fight to defend public education in the US

Educators Rank-and-File Committee (US)
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As the 2024-25 school year begins in the United States, a season of struggle is opening up for teachers and school workers.

Educators and all sections of the working class face an unprecedented assault on basic social rights, including jobs, access to healthcare and decent living standards. Democratic rights, including freedom of speech and the right to strike, are being stripped from the population. Both parties of American capitalism, the Republicans and Democrats, lurch towards dictatorship at home and global war abroad.

These are the essential issues that confront educators in the defense of public education. Moreover, these are the same driving forces that are propelling educators into struggle all over the world.

The very existence of public education is at stake, the signs of which are visible everywhere. Schools are being shuttered by the dozens in communities across the US, and thousands of educators and other essential staff, such as librarians, school counselors and mental health workers, are losing their jobs. Those who remain eke out a living with low pay, high healthcare premiums and ever-increasing workloads.

A Pew Research Center survey confirmed this nationally. Seventy percent of teachers reported understaffing, 98 percent said they had too much work, 77 percent said their job was “extremely stressful,” and over half (52 percent) said they would not advise young people to become teachers.

Poverty was cited as the single greatest “major problem” in schools, with chronic absenteeism and anxiety/depression of students close behind. Precisely! The growth of poverty throughout the United States translates in a million different ways, including absenteeism and mental health crises, into a Sisyphean struggle for school workers.

Neither the Democrats nor the Republicans even make the pretense of claiming they will reverse the decades-long degradation of schools. This requires fighting for social equality and socialism.

Additionally, the bipartisan destruction of public health continues to imperil our own health and lives and those of our students. The school year starts amid a massive COVID-19 surge, already forcing schools to close. Two weeks into the semester, the coronavirus was detected in the wastewater of two-thirds (29 out of 45) of schools in Houston, Texas.

After four years, virtually nothing has been done to ensure that clean indoor air is provided to stop airborne transmission in the vast majority of America’s schools. As Dr. Amy Proal, a leading researcher on Long COVID, told the *World Socialist Web Site*:

We’re seeding children, from a young age, with viral RNA in their tissues, with a virus that people are getting multiple times a year as it continues to mutate, and we ... see that reinfection seems

to up the chances of developing chronic symptoms. It’s absolutely unsustainable and a complete crisis.

The de-funding of public education and public health does not reflect an overall lack of resources in our society. On the contrary, the wealth of the financial oligarchy has ballooned, up 88 percent since 2020. The 737 billionaires in the US alone control a combined wealth of \$5.53 trillion.

The source of all this near-unimaginable wealth is the labor of the working class, but we have no say-so on its distribution. Trillions of dollars are flowing upwards from the working class into the pockets of a handful of corporate oligarchs and into a war machine to promote their interests. We are living in the midst of a barbaric redivision of the world between global billionaires.

At the center of the defense of education must be the fight against war

The era of “guns *and* butter” is long over, and the ever-broadening military budget to conduct the wars of American imperialism means sacrificing schools, hospitals and democracy itself. Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Joseph Kishore aptly characterized this bipartisan policy, noting:

The claims by Bernie Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez (a member of the Democratic Socialists of America) and others that [Kamala] Harris will implement major social reforms are lies, and they know they are lies. Everything is to be subordinated to the ruling class agenda of war abroad, of global plunder, which requires a massive escalation of the war on the working class at home.

The Biden-Harris decision to allow the expiration of the desperately needed Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds has plunged districts into crisis nearly everywhere.

As for Trump and the Republicans, whose vision has been inscribed in the fascist manifesto Project 2025, they aim to close the Department of Education, end Title I, and fast-track school privatizations nationally. Their priority, no less than Harris, is the brutal competition for global hegemony. Trump has pledged to expand the size of the US military and impose 100 percent tariffs on Chinese goods, a move that would have devastating consequences for the living standards of working people and

greatly intensify the threat of war between the US and China.

Like every concession won by prior generations of workers, public education is being shelved as “unaffordable” by both parties of the capitalist elite.

Oppose fascism and xenophobia! Democratic rights for all!

Schools have become an epicenter for the suppression of democratic rights by both Democratic and Republican officials. The ruling class is seeking to squash a growing opposition on college and K-12 campuses, moving to ban books, purge school libraries and censor curricula of any ideas that express rebellion or even critical thought.

Opposition to genocide and war are being criminalized, as seen in mass arrests, doxxing and retaliation against college students protesting the Gaza genocide, and the victimization of educators who came to their defense. In New York City, the largest school district in the United States, the Democratic administration of Mayor Eric Adams, with the backing of the right-wing media, has fired pro-Palestine educators and issued directives against educators’ political activity outside of their workday.

Trump has said that if he returns to power, he will act as a dictator on “day one,” and that if he is re-elected, “you won’t have to [vote] anymore.” He has placed at the center of his election campaign a fascist attack on immigrants, who he has said are “poisoning the blood of our country,” a fascist phrase pulled directly from Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*.

The threat of dictatorship is real, but to believe that the Democrats can defend democracy is a grave mistake. They had four years to arrest Trump and his co-conspirators for the January 6 coup attempt. Instead, they have strengthened their “Republican colleagues” at every step, attacking Trump from the right on matters of war, immigration and American nationalism. The breakdown of democracy is a global issue that arises from the crisis of capitalism—its expansion of war and the extreme growth of social inequality—as seen in the rise of the far right in countries like France, Italy and Germany.

A fundamental reorganization of social life is required

The defense of basic democratic and social rights cannot be secured outside of a frontal assault on the wealth and privileges of the corporate and financial oligarchy. The basic social rights of the population, essential to modern life, can only be achieved through a fundamental reorganization of economic power and the redistribution of wealth within the United States. The vast wealth created by the labor of generations of workers must be taken out of the hands of a privileged few and put at the disposal of the population as a whole. This is the fight for socialism.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) stand in opposition to this struggle, just as they have blocked the fight against budget cuts and layoffs across the US for decades, and sacrificed a generation of students and their teachers to the homicidal “forever COVID” policy dictated by Wall Street. The leadership of these so-called “unions” does not unite the working class for struggle, only to get out the vote for the big business Democratic Party politicians so that the union tops (whose annual take is upwards of \$500,000) maintain their dues stream.

The pro-capitalist, pro-war nature of these organizations led Biden to recently describe them candidly as his “domestic NATO.” In point of fact, AFT President Randi Weingarten has played a pivotal propaganda

role in lending support to the US-NATO war against Russia, the US-backed Israeli genocide against the Palestinians, and the police-state crackdown against anti-genocide protests, demonstrating that there is no line these bureaucrats won’t cross to keep their “seat at the table.”

Towards a new road and perspective

Strikes and struggles among educators—which exploded among academic workers last year—are on the agenda. Educators are ready to fight for their students and schools but will find no answers from the pro-capitalist, pro-war AFT and NEA bureaucrats.

This is demonstrated by the recent gatherings of both organizations. The AFT national convention was nothing more than a get-out-the-vote rally, and the NEA convention was aborted as the union locked out its own striking staffers, turning off their phones and canceling their reservations, stranding them in Philadelphia in retribution. The ferocity of the NEA brass’s response to the strike by lower-level bureaucrats is a warning of how it will respond to a rebellion of its membership. The chasm between this well-fed apparatus and the rank and file has never been greater.

As the school year opens, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is a crucial battleground and a politically telling one. Teachers have been told to go back to work without a contract, because they are negotiating with a so-called “ally,” Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson, a former staffer of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) who was promoted by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

The CTU has an entirely undeserved reputation for militancy and is held as the model of “reform unionism” in the face of growing opposition from below. But its fake socialist leadership, part of the DSA, has pushed the idea of “common good” demands while colluding with the CPS to enforce hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts, numerous school closures and the continued destruction of Chicago’s education system. They are part and parcel of the entire AFT and NEA apparatus, which is focused on the election of Harris-Walz, maintaining their lucrative “seats at the table” and once again throwing teachers under the bus.

Educators require an entirely different political orientation, fully independent of the oligarchy, its two political parties and the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy.

Build Rank-and-File Committees to unite educators across the US and internationally!

We urge educators to take the first step by joining and expanding the network of Educators Rank-and-File Committees (ERFC) across the US. This is part of a strategy to unite educators with the broader struggles of the international working class in a common program against austerity and war.

We issue the following demands:

- **For the full funding of public education, not war!** The trillions of dollars squandered on war must be used to pay for high quality public education and other social needs. This includes adequate pay and cost-of-living adjustments for all educators, free healthcare for educators and students, universal free school lunch and other resources.

- **No more school closures, layoffs or program eliminations!** Keep schools open, reinstate the thousands of educators whose jobs have been cut in recent years and keep afterschool and extracurricular programs open.

• **Full staffing in every school!** All schools must have the necessary educators to provide small class sizes, with librarians, nurses, counselors and special education support.

• **Clean, safe COVID-free school buildings!** All schools must be retrofitted to ensure continuous clean air, including with proper ventilation, filtration and other mitigation measures, and educators must have the right to close schools if they become unsafe.

• **For the defense of democratic rights!** No censorship laws, book bans or state-imposed religion in schools. Students and educators have the right to protest and demonstrate.

• **No to the militarization of schools!** The military has no place on campuses where they prey on vulnerable working class youth with the promise of a college education. We will not allow our students to be cannon fodder in the wars of American imperialism!

• **Build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC)!** Educators and workers throughout the world are entering into struggle and face the same threats of austerity, war and dictatorship. We cannot fight these issues separately on a national basis but only together in a unified struggle. The ERFC stands in solidarity with and calls for workers to build the IWA-RFC!

Educators, parents and school workers who agree with our program should get in touch today to build a rank-and-file committee at your school.



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