Wartime economy vs. public education: Harris' platform promotes the school-to-military industry pipeline

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No matter which of the two big-business candidates for US president takes office, Kamala Harris or Donald Trump, the frontal assault on the social right to high-quality public education will escalate.

Alongside the termination of thousands of jobs and the reorganization of US industries, including mass layoffs of auto, tech and logistics workers, the education system is being upended and thousands of school workers are losing their jobs. Schools are being put on rations in both "red" and "blue" states.

The goals of education are themselves being degraded through this bipartisan policy. In numerous ways, young people are being discouraged from pursuing their interests and intellect, and instead being groomed to enter the workforce or military, and the sooner the better. Discipline and obedience are promoted, with growing numbers of police in the schools, endless shooting drills, cell phone bans, library and book bans. Military recruiters are being invited onto campuses and the ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) is being promoted in middle and high schools. Brutality is becoming routine.

For their part, Trump and the Republicans make no pretense of improving working class schools, instead pushing for a vast expansion of vouchers and other forms of taxpayer funding for private schools. Project 2025, written by Trump supporters and former aides, calls for an end to the US Department of Education and the transformation of Title I (federal assistance for public schools) and IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) into block grants in order to cut their budgets. The fascist Republicans are using their "anti-DEI" campaigns to demonize educators and students, censor educational materials, and demand the promotion of religion, the military and patriotism in schools.

The Democrats—also fully serving Wall Street—seek the same ends, just by slightly different means. Under the Democratic administration of Biden/Harris, COVID-19 ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds have been terminated, and districts across the country are shutting schools, ending tutoring, and laying off teachers, nurses, counselors and support staff. The job outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc. puts 2024 cuts to education jobs at 25,396, up 222 percent from last year. This is just the beginning, with as many as 384,000 education jobs to be cut, according to industry consultant Chad Ferguson.

These cuts are devastating districts from coast to coast. To give a sense of the widespread assault, one can point to over 100 schools at risk for closure or consolidation in Chicago, up to 13 schools to be closed or merged in Milwaukee, 14 schools slated for closure or consolidation as well as the closure of three alternative or special education programs in Pittsburgh, and more. This week, teachers in Ann Arbor, Michigan told the media that they face a possible doubling of their healthcare costs. Albany, Oregon teachers voted by 92 percent to strike in opposition to low pay, overcrowded classrooms and lack of resources for students.

For decades, the Democrats have boasted of supporting "school reform" privatization schemes and, together with the Republicans, systematically cutting budgets. The priority of the Democratic Party is the corporate-financial oligarchy's demand for expanding US wars of aggression. Discussion in ruling circles is that the US is heading for "total war," requiring a "whole society" effort and a wartime economy.

The ruling class sees funding for public education as an overall deduction from the surplus value created by the working class, and, as such, a diversion from profits. Any social resources that once went into schools and social programs are being diverted to war.

The Biden/Harris administration has allocated over $1 trillion in the current budget for military spending, an all-time record. These vast sums are supplemented by many hundreds of millions of special appropriations to the fascist Netanyahu regime, which is carrying out genocide in Gaza and now raining down death on Lebanon. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been allocated for the proxy war in Ukraine being conducted by the US and NATO against nuclear-armed Russia.

The demands of "total war" mean not just budget cuts, but also more munitions and more enlistments. To that end, millions in new dollars are being made available to promote technical training for semiconductor production and other necessary war-time goods.

Kamala Harris toured Michigan's Hemlock Semiconductor Plant this past Monday to emphasize her support for expanding semiconductor manufacturing in the US, which has been a major aspect of the Biden administration's preparations for war. Harris' tour coincided with the announcement of hiring at a nearby new facility that is set to become the nation's largest silicon wafer production plant, a key component in semiconductor manufacturing.

At the plant, she said, "I believe that as we think of industries of the future and the future of America's workforce, we need to get beyond this idea that the only high skilled jobs require a college degree." She proceeded to declare that one of her first actions as president would be to reassess federal jobs and identify which ones did not require a college degree.

Harris' comments are nearly identical to those which the Biden administration has been emphasizing to youth as part of a strategy to

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shift semiconductor production to the United States. Last year, President Biden's wife, Dr. Jill Biden, was featured in *Teen Vogue* magazine with stories of her visiting community colleges and telling young people, "You don't need a four-year degree to get a good-paying job." Labor Secretary Julie Su traveled with her to promote the US Department of Labor's "Youth Employment Works" strategy, which is directed at expanding employment for young people 14 to 24 years of age.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and its president, Randi Weingarten, have been active in facilitating this school-to-factory pipeline. Starting this school year, New York state schools began a program with Micron Technology to funnel high school students into the high-tech semiconductor industry. The project is currently expanding to encompass over 1,500 high school students in New York, Michigan and Minnesota. Funding for the project was provided by the CHIPS and Science Act, signed by Biden in 2022, which authorized over $280 billion for semiconductor production and research.

The trade union bureaucracy is assisting with the school-to-military technology pipeline and attempting to whip up pro-war sentiment. Weingarten plays a critical role in the capitalist state as an ambassador for war against Russia. She has visited Ukraine on numerous occasions. She has also been vocal in her support for "Israel's right to defend itself," promoting the lying claim that anti-genocide protesters are "antisemitic," as Israel, with Washington's backing, carries out a campaign to starve out and kill the last 100,000 people in Northern Gaza.

In schools, and even in colleges across the US, the arts, humanities, history and culture are being stripped from curricula while technical education is promoted. Working class youth are being actively discouraged from pursuing college, and high schools are increasingly promoting "job ready" skills and providing course credit for outside jobs.

Over a dozen states across the US have introduced legislation in recent years seeking to significantly loosen child labor laws. One example is an Iowa bill enacted last year that allows minors to work at more jobs, for longer hours, and later at night. The US Department of Labor reported an 88 percent increase in child labor violations between 2019 and 2023.

One such violation involves a 16-year-old named Derrick who lost both legs in a trenching accident while working for a construction company in Washington state last year. He was part of a school-sponsored work-based learning program, earning class credit for on-the-job hours. The tragedy occurred due to inadequate supervision and a failure by both the school district and the company to maintain proper safety monitoring.

Meanwhile, "chronic absenteeism" is being used by school administrators to punish students and go after parents. Kamala Harris, who as San Francisco district attorney fined and jailed parents when their children missed too much school, has pledged to make the assault on "chronic absenteeism" a cornerstone of her education platform.

Harris' promises to provide universal Pre-K education and fight absenteeism are part of the plan to increase the workforce population, with the aim of funneling youth into producing for a wartime economy. This was acutely demonstrated during the early years of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. With pressure from both parties, school districts played a major role in attacking parents who did not want to send their children to COVID-infested classrooms, threatening them with fines and visits from Child Protective Services if their children had too many sick days. The aim was to ensure that parents reported to work, sending their children to school regardless of the toll on public health.

Opposition to austerity and school closures is already mounting. In Chicago, educators and parents are protesting the threat of closures and the firing of over 270 educators, what one teacher referred to as "an act of social arson." Earlier this month, hundreds of educators in East Orange, New Jersey staged a two-day sickout after the school board decided to cut 93 jobs. In Canada, some 3,200 Edmonton public school support staff walked off the job last week to protest low wages.

Educators expressing opposition to austerity are part of a broader global upsurge in the class struggle. The strike by 33,000 Boeing engineers is in its seventh week, with Labor Secretary Julie Su being brought in to force through a contract and end the strike, as was done to East Coast dockworkers last month and railroad workers in 2022. The powerful strike at Boeing is threatening the war plans of US imperialism against Iran, Russia and China.

Furthermore, the development of the class struggle is beginning to take on political dimensions, including the critical strike back in May of graduate student instructors at the University of California, who struck against the repression of students for protesting the Gaza genocide.

The prime obstacle facing the working class is the trade union apparatus. In the realm of public education, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are both directly involved in the Harris campaign, stumping around the country for her, leading various get-out-the-vote campaigns, and suppressing opposition from rank-and-file teachers and staff who refuse to support Harris.

The trade union bureaucracies are raising no warnings of the threat from Harris' policy, shared by Trump, of refashioning education, the economy and all production to align more directly with US imperialist interests. The growing opposition to austerity, budget cuts, school closures and mass layoffs must take on a conscious political character. The working class must establish new rank-and-file organizations to overthrow the labor bureaucrats and take control of its own struggles, uniting with workers across the country and internationally, and build a new, socialist leadership to establish its political independence from both capitalist parties.

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