Teachers union officials sow complacency over Trump's threat of fascist transformation of public education

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American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten has joined the chorus of Democratic Party officials and trade union bureaucrats downplaying the fascistic character of the incoming Trump administration. Her press release issued November 6 admits that "our democracy is in jeopardy," but lamely concludes that "what binds us as Americans is far more important than what divides us."

Weingarten's call for "unity" was followed up with the announcement of a webinar in which she will "explore the transformative power of storytelling to foster understanding, empathy and resilience—no matter where people stand politically."

Becky Pringle, president of the National Education Association (NEA), sowed complacency, giving no indication anything significant had changed in the aftermath of the Republican sweep. "Nothing will stop us from protecting, promoting and strengthening public education. We are doubling down on our fight for our students, our schools and our communities. We will not be deterred."

Contrary to the complacency of the NEA and AFT bureaucracies, little more than a week after the election of Trump strikes by educators have broken out in three school districts on the North Shore of Massachusetts with more than 10,000 students.

The action by 2,300 members of these NEA-affiliated unions indicates a mood of defiance over the slashing of school budgets and the attempts by localities to impose budget shortfalls onto teachers through both dwindling wages in the face of inflation, and the cutting of vital school services for students.

The Democratic Party-led state government and two of the struck districts have already sought draconian fines of $50,000 to $100,000 a day against the unions to attempt to force educators back into classrooms based on reactionary state laws that outlaw public-sector strikes. Earlier this year in Newton, Massachusetts, the local NEA-affiliated union agreed to nearly $1 million in fines while pushing through a sellout contract that failed to meet teachers' and paraprofessionals' demands on pay and benefits, ending their 11-day strike.

While the wealthy Democratic Party operatives in the top rungs of the AFT and NEA union bureaucracies seek to chloroform the working class, Donald Trump and the Republican Party are preparing a frontal assault on public education, healthcare and democratic rights.

They plan to wage a social counterrevolution to roll back all the gains of the working class and open the money spigots even wider for the oligarchy. To that end, Trump has vowed to cut $2 trillion from social spending.

Trump's 10-point plan

On November 10, Trump announced his 10-point education plan, which largely echoes Project 2025 (which he disavowed during the election). At the center of this plan is the closure of the Department of Education (ED). "We're going to send it all back to the states," concluded Trump.

The ED was established in 1979 under President Jimmy Carter to provide federal funding to "ensure equal access" to public education—a goal the US has obviously failed to achieve, but which the billionaire oligarchy and Trump now plan to destroy.

The ED administers federal grant programs, including the $18.4 billion Title I program that provides supplemental funding to high-poverty K-12 schools and the $15.5 billion Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that helps cover the cost of education for students with disabilities. The department also oversees the $1.6 trillion federal student loan program, provides national statistics on enrollment and staffing and enforces civil rights laws that bar discrimination in federally funded schools.

Trump has claimed that ED functions will be transferred to other federal departments and the states, while Democrats have pointed out that dissolving ED requires an act of Congress. Such caveats are worthless when the aims are clear—a reorganization of public education on the cheap to funnel working class youth to production work or the military alongside an ideological attack on democratic principles and core freedoms of educators and students.

Trump has pledged to phase out Title I. The effects of such a decision are immeasurable. Title I, considered an expansion of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, was passed in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Currently, nearly half (43 percent) of all US schools qualify—an indication of the prevalence of "high poverty" across the US. Any cuts to these funds, much less their elimination, would destroy schools.

The $15.5 billion IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, is a federal law originally passed in 1975 that calls for Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to be made available to children with disabilities and to ensure that eligible children receive special education and related services.

While IDEA was never fully funded and cut significantly under Obama, the Trump plan to transform it into "block grants" at the state level will pave the way for its evisceration. In the near term, transforming the program into state-controlled block grants would

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likely be used to end anti-discrimination and reporting requirements.

To the extent that federal funding remains, Trump has stated that these resources will be used to demand ideological conformity with "American values." He has stated, "We will drain the government education swamp and stop the abuse of your taxpayer dollars to indoctrinate America's youth with all sorts of things that you don't want to have our youth hearing."

Michigan State University professor Josh Cowen explained in a recent *Time* article, "It's absolutely accurate and fair to say that the Trump administration will be looking to penalize any institution, whether K-12 or higher ed, for administering DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) programs. How much money they can remove, how hard they can make life bureaucratically, those are still slightly open questions, but they're absolutely going to try that."

Overall, the shutdown of the Department of Education would devolve near-complete control of K-12 education to the states. "States' rights," including in education, has a long and thoroughly reactionary record. One has only to recall the massive state-led rebellion against the implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

As to higher education, Trump plans to weaponize the accreditation process to "reclaim our once great educational institutions from the radical left," and instill conservative values in these independent institutions. If colleges do not adopt Trump's right-wing values, they too will be in jeopardy of losing federal funding. Congress controls 43 percent of public funding for colleges and universities through federal appropriations.

Trump's other education priorities enumerated in his 10-point program or on his website include:

Barring immigrants the right to public education. Trump has declared he will carry out the largest deportation program in US history. This would mean the use of mass repression and police violence against immigrants throughout the US. As part of his deportation plan, Trump has planned to also attack birthright citizenship as well as bar undocumented children from public education, which would have a devastating impact on youth and families throughout the US.

To carry out these fascist policies, Trump recently announced Stephen Miller as his pick for deputy White House chief of staff for policy. Miller was an adviser under Trump's first term, responsible for the "zero tolerance" policy that viciously separated immigrant parents from their children in 2018. Tom Homan, former Immigration and Customs Enforcement director under Trump, has been named the new "border czar" by Trump tasked with carrying out the mass deportations and heightening military-police repression at the border and throughout the US. When asked whether deportations would separate families, Homan said, "families could be deported together." This would include children who are born in the US and therefore American citizens.

Parents should control education. The Parents Bill of Rights Act, which outlines a broad-based assault on culture, social equality, and the democratic rights of educators and students, will be signed into law. The legislation authorizes parents to exert authoritarian policies such as censorship of books and curricula. Further, Trump calls for the direct election of school principals by parents.

Prayer and patriotism in schools. State-sanctioned prayer was outlawed by the US Supreme Court in 1962 when the court upheld the "wall of separation" between government and religion in line with the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. Trump's plan would require the reversal of the Supreme Court precedent to enable states and localities to push religion on schoolchildren. The precedent was set for such a reversal in the 2022 decision in *Dobbs* that stripped abortion rights from the American population.

Under Trump's plan, religion would be combined with patriotic humbug, bigotry, anticommunism and xenophobia. "We will teach students to love their country, not to hate their country like they're taught right now," he states. Education is a particular target not just because of its costs. The ruling oligarchy especially fears the youth and, above all, growing numbers who oppose war and identify capitalism as the main problem in society. Addressing these concerns, Ryan Walters, Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction and potential Department of Education secretary appointee, issued a memorandum this week calling for Trump to "Protect patriotism in curriculum," "stop illegal immigration's impact on schools" and "weed out Marxists."

Privatization. Trump calls for universal school vouchers: "We will give all parents the right to choose another school for their children if they want. It's called school choice." The ruling elites have long sought to reorganize education on a strictly for-profit basis, and Democrats and the teachers' unions have "partnered" in this process of "school reform" for decades, laying the basis for this attempt to completely overhaul the system.

Focus on discipline, "useful subjects" and work-readiness. "We will ensure our classrooms are focused not on political indoctrination but on teaching the knowledge and skills needed to succeed: Reading, writing, math, science, arithmetic and other truly useful subjects," says Trump in point 9. He adds that schools should provide "access to work experiences that can set them on a path to their first job." While arts, humanities and culture will be deleted from curricula, there will be a regime of "immediate expulsion" for students who inflict "harm" on another student or teacher.

The 2024 elections made clear the Democratic Party has absolutely nothing to offer the hard-pressed working class except more war and austerity, leading to a collapse of Democratic Party votes and a Republican sweep. Weingarten and Pringle—who collectively head unions with over 4 million members—are not preparing to fight the fascist policies of Trump but to suppress the resistance of educators to this onslaught.

This means that educators, parents and students must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union apparatus and all wings of the capitalist class, to prepare for the enormous struggles ahead. The fight to expand the network of educators rank-and-file committees must be part of a political counter-offensive of the working class to abolish the source of fascism, austerity and war—the capitalist profit system.

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