

Opposition of educators grows to Trump's existential threat to public education

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Join the upcoming online meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Committee (US). 'Stop Trump's Plans to Gut Public Education! Mobilize the Working Class in Defense of Immigrants and Social Rights!' on March 15, at 12 p.m. EDT. Register here.

Opposition is mounting among educators, parents and students across the United States to President Trump's plans to shut down the Department of Education (ED) and dismantle the nation's public school system.

Concern is intensifying following the Senate confirmation earlier this week of Trump's pick to lead the department, Linda McMahon, a billionaire wrestling industry magnate. McMahon supports the expansion of school vouchers, which divert public funds to private, for-profit charter and parochial schools—undermining the constitutional separation of church and state while slashing or eliminating federal funding for low-income, disabled and non-English-speaking students.

“What Trump is doing will be a disaster for education,” a teacher who joined her students in a walkout at Detroit's Western International High School against the witch hunt of immigrants earlier in the week told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

She continued:

If the Department of Education is disbanded, the schools will be in trouble. Title 3 and Title 9 funds a lot of positions. It will hurt the most vulnerable students, including those with disabilities.

The public schools are already hanging on by a thread. We need more funding, more staff, more supplies. I can only imagine how bad it would be to do with less. My school has 1,200 ESL (English as a Second Language) students. Most speak English well, but they grew up in families who spoke a different language at home. Plus, we have hundreds of newcomers.

The district is required by law to have ESL services, but they are not getting it because of the lack of staff. They say we have a “failing school,” but 75 percent of the students are English learners, and they are not getting the services they need.

Michael, a New York City teacher, said:

An attack on public education is an attack on democracy itself. A democracy requires informed, critical citizens; though Trump and his corporate backers would much prefer unquestioning, obedient workers. No doubt, they plan to privatize and Christianize our public schools, destroying a cornerstone of our pluralistic society. First they came for the books, then they came for public education; next they'll come for our Republic.

Shortly after her confirmation, McMahon sent an email to ED employees stating that Trump and the American voters had “tasked us with accomplishing the elimination of the bureaucratic bloat here at the Education Department—a momentous final mission—quickly and responsibly.” She added that education would be “sent back to the states.”

A California teacher said, “McMahon shouldn't even be in the position. The Secretary of Education should be a former teacher who supports public education, not the privatization of the education system.”

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, an executive order has already been drawn up for Trump to sign, which would direct the McMahon to “take all necessary steps to facilitate the closure of the Education Department” based on “the maximum extent appropriate and permitted by law.”

“The experiment of controlling American education through Federal programs and dollars—and the unaccountable bureaucrats those programs and dollars support—has failed our children, our teachers, and our families,” the draft order reads.

The abolition of the half-century-old department by presidential executive order would be illegal, as the funds the ED administers are mandated by federal law. Legal experts cited by the *Wall Street Journal* state that dismantling the department would require a 60-vote majority in the Senate. However, the article ominously notes, “The draft order doesn't mention Congress,” suggesting that Trump may attempt to violate federal law.

According to the American Federation of Teachers, the ED is legally required to distribute funds that support 26 million children living in poverty through Title I, 7.5 million students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 10 million students relying on Pell Grants for college or trade education, and 12 million benefiting from career and technical education through Perkins grants.

On March 4, the administration canceled over \$1.25 billion in ED contracts and grants or imposed other operational cuts. Hundreds of millions have been slashed from programs tracking student outcomes and reading instruction strategies, teacher training initiatives, collaborations between universities and high need schools, support for rural schools and other critical education programs.

As anger mounts, the AFT (American Federation of Teachers) and NEA (National Education Association) bureaucracies have responded with a series of impotent March4Education protests this week, urging parents to write to Congress in opposition to Trump's measures. Tied to the Democratic Party, which is capitulating to Trump, union officials are working to prevent a repeat of the wildcat strikes that swept the country during his first administration. Instead, they are peddling the illusion that the courts will intervene and that electing Democrats in 2026 will somehow restore "normalcy."

Commenting on the unions, a Detroit high school teacher said:

The DFT [Detroit Federation of Teachers] doesn't want any members involved, and hardly any people show up at the union meetings. They told us at the next meeting they are going to set a fundraising goal for the Democrats. That's crazy! What have the Democrats done for us? I got tired of Sanders when he wouldn't stand up for the Palestinians.

I've lost faith in the Democrats for a while. You expect them to stand up, like they claim they are going to do, but it never happens. It's obvious that the Democrats aren't for us and won't fight Trump. They just reveal that there are two faces of the same party.

You have some teachers saying that, if they shut down the ED, the next day should be a teachers general strike. But there is more potential than there is a movement right now. We need to build up a movement for that. I was inspired by what the teachers did in West Virginia and other states in 2018, and we need to do something like that again.

The 2018 strike wave by teachers in West Virginia, Arizona and Oklahoma was sparked by rank-and-file educators in direct rebellion against the AFT and NEA, which worked to suppress any meaningful struggle during Trump's first administration.

The Detroit teacher continued:

The AFT is really controlled by an old guard that sets the political bounds and makes it hard for younger teachers to change anything. The March4education was bogus. We need a mass movement of people out there to stop what Trump is doing. Only the people have the power to stop this.

In contrast to the union bureaucracy, educators are pressing for decisive action against the existential threat to public education.

In **Chicago**, nearly 28,000 teachers and school support staff have been working without a contract for over eight months, with growing support for strike action to recover lost wages and oppose demands by school authorities and Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson for huge cuts, including potential layoffs and school closures. The district faces a \$500 million deficit for the 2025 fiscal year, largely due to the Biden administration's decision to let federal COVID-19 school funding expire.

Although the months-long mediation, fact-finding and "cooling off" period have expired—legally allowing teachers to strike under Illinois law—the Chicago Teachers Union has yet to even call a strike authorization vote.

In **Portland, Oregon**, educators, who struck in November 2023, are fighting demands for \$40 million in cuts. The Democratic-controlled school district has been cutting the budget since the 2022-23 academic year, but officials claim that additional costs from the contract after the strike must now be made up.

In addition, 35,000 educators in **Los Angeles**, 14,000 in **Philadelphia**, 7,000 in **San Diego**, 6,500 in **San Francisco** and 3,000 in **Oakland** have contract battles this year.

Conditions are rapidly emerging for a powerful nationwide struggle by educators, uniting with broader sections of the working class to oppose the witch hunting of immigrants, the mass firing of federal workers, Musk's threats to privatize the US Postal Service and Amtrak, and the gutting of vital social programs like Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, which tens of millions rely on.

But such a movement requires independent organization and leadership, free from the control of the trade union bureaucracies and the Democratic Party. This means building rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood to unite workers across industries and borders, mobilize in mass protests, strikes and coordinate national and international actions.

Such action must be united with a political struggle against both corporate-controlled parties, the expropriation of the oligarchs, and the redistribution of wealth to secure the democratic and social rights of the working class, including the right to free, high quality education for all.



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