

The American oligarchy declares war on public education

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The Trump administration and newly confirmed Education Secretary and billionaire Linda McMahon have begun dismantling the US public education system. Public schools, built through 250 years of struggle, educate tens of millions of students and are overwhelmingly supported by the population as a fundamental democratic right.

According to a March 6 *Washington Post* article, congressional Republicans are pushing for a universal school voucher system in the budget reconciliation bill. Combined with the administration's plan to shut down the Department of Education, this is part of a broader effort to dismantle public education entirely.

In line with Trump's January 29 Executive Order, "Expanding Educational Freedom and Opportunity for Families," the Republican voucher plan would divert \$5-10 billion in public funds to private, parochial and homeschooling.

"The program would be fueled by a powerful, never-before-tried incentive: Taxpayers who donate to voucher programs would get 100 percent of their money back when they file their taxes," the *Post* reported. Wealthy individuals and corporations could invest in or donate stocks to these programs, gaining dollar-for-dollar tax deductions while avoiding capital gains taxes.

The measure would be "the greatest threat to public education we've ever had at the federal level," said Sasha Pudelski, director of advocacy for the School Superintendents Association.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Trump had a draft executive order to shut down the Department of Education (ED), though legal experts note it would require a 60-vote majority in the Senate. In the meantime, billionaires McMahon and Musk are executing a slash-and-burn operation—eliminating ED jobs, canceling grants and abruptly ending research and support programs.

The Department of Education provides critical support to underfunded schools and enforces anti-discrimination policies established through landmark rulings like *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1975) and *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), which protect minorities, students with disabilities, English-language learners and immigrants. These gains are now under direct attack, with Trump using Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs as a pretext to dismantle democratic rights.

Last week, Trump slashed \$400 million in federal funding to Columbia University as retaliation for student-led anti-genocide protests. This week, he ordered the denial of student loan

forgiveness to teachers and nonprofit workers deemed to "harm American values" or who engage in "public disruptions"—effectively imposing a political loyalty test.

In K-12 education, an Executive Order now requires the teaching of the "1776 Report," authored by far-right ideologues, along with other lies aimed at censoring the history of American imperialism, the suppression of the working class, and—above all—the class struggle and socialism.

Universal public education, a core ideal of the Enlightenment, has long been seen as essential to democracy and a safeguard against authoritarianism. Just three years after drafting the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson authored *A Bill for the General Diffusion of Knowledge* in 1779, reflecting the revolutionary founders' belief that education was the foundation of democracy and social and political rights. "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves," Jefferson wrote, adding, "The remedy is not to take power from them, but to inform their discretion by education."

The expansion of public education, however, was won through mass struggles. The Civil War—the Second American Revolution—was necessary to secure education rights for black people and many poor whites while expanding the system nationwide. After the defeat of the slavocracy, President Ulysses S. Grant mandated that states "establish and forever maintain free public schools" of a secular character, reinforcing the democratic principle of the separation of church and state.

The fight against child labor and for universal public education was a central demand of the early American labor movement. This struggle was given a huge impulse by the 1917 Russian Revolution, which created the first workers' state and launched an unprecedented campaign for literacy and education. A 1919 decree mandated education for all Soviet citizens aged 8 to 50. By 1939, literacy among men had risen to 87 percent—far exceeding rates in Western countries.

The rise of the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) movement in the 1930s, led by socialists inspired by the Russian Revolution, along with the massive post-war strike wave of 1945-46 and the decades-long Civil Rights movement significantly advanced the fight for quality public education. By 1955, high school graduation rates reached 80 percent for the first time, and by the 1960s, college became widely accessible to the working class.

Trump and McMahon are demanding the closure of the federal

education department in order to “return education to the states.” This is a rehash of the “states’ rights” slogan the Southern segregationists used to oppose the racial integration of public schools.

The working class did not receive public education as a gift—it fought for it. However, as American capitalism has plunged into crisis, waged endless wars and fostered skyrocketing social inequality—especially over the past three decades—both corporate-controlled parties have systematically defunded public education.

Trump is following the blueprint laid by Democratic President Bill Clinton, who “ended welfare as we know it” in 1996. By converting federal aid into state-controlled block grants, Clinton upended key New Deal and Great Society programs. Trump has made clear that he intends to do the same with Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), effectively gutting these critical educational programs.

Former Democratic President Barack Obama notoriously slashed Title I aid to impoverished schools and the IDEA, axing the jobs of hundreds of thousands of educators and further institutionalizing school choice and merit pay through Race To The Top.

Last year, Biden allowed the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund (ESSER) to expire, cutting off a \$190 billion lifeline to struggling school districts nationwide. This triggered mass layoffs, program cuts and school closures across the country.

Like every other aspect of his policies, Trump’s assault on public education is also a cash grab. Global venture capital investment in education businesses is surging, and the profit-mad oligarchy seeks to dismantle public education, siphoning its \$850 billion budget into private hands or redirecting it to fund imperialist wars abroad.

But for the gangsters in the White House, this is about more than just privatization. Like every other democratic right, universal public education is fundamentally incompatible with the domination of society by an oligarchy.

The ruling class deeply fears the working class, freedom of inquiry and expression and education itself. It is using its control of the purse strings to fuel all manner of social backwardness, including xenophobia, racism, opposition to science and religious obscurantism.

Trump and the oligarchy may believe they can destroy two-and-a-half centuries of democratic rights, but the working class, the most powerful constituency for democracy, must and will not let them.

The last two years have seen escalating struggles by educators across the world against austerity and cuts, including major strikes in the United Kingdom, Romania, Hungary, Portugal, Morocco, Kenya, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico and many other countries.

Across the US, school walkouts and protests over immigrant rights, budget cuts, school closures, the genocide in Gaza, and war are escalating. Hundreds of workers are packing local school board meetings to oppose cuts, while strike battles among educators are brewing in Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego and other cities.

Educators must learn from past struggles. In 2018-19, during Trump’s first administration, teachers launched a powerful strike

wave across West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky, North Carolina, Colorado and beyond, rebelling against the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) bureaucracies. However, the union apparatus—assisted by the Democratic Socialists of America and other pseudo-left groups—regained control by promoting the lie that electing a Democrat would protect public education.

Trump cannot be fought by relying on the Democrats and the AFT and NEA bureaucracies, which have responded to the existential threat to public education by telling parents to write letters to Congress.

The defense of education requires a political and industrial mobilization of the working class against both capitalist political parties and the capitalist system they defend.

This requires expanding the network of rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood, uniting educators with parents, students and the broader working class—including federal workers, logistics and manufacturing workers—through mass meetings, protests and strikes to defend public education. This struggle must be linked to the defense of immigrant workers and their families, opposition to the crackdown on free speech on campuses, resistance to Medicaid and social service cuts and the fight to end imperialist war.

The defense and vast improvement of public education, like every other democratic and social right, can only be secured through a political struggle by the working class to abolish the capitalist system, expropriate the wealth of the oligarchy, and redistribute society’s resources to meet human needs, not private profit. This requires the fight for socialism—the reorganization of economic and political life on the basis of social equality and democratic control by the working class itself.

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.



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