

The oligarchy's war on public education: money, militarization and social control

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As teachers and students return to classrooms for the 2026–27 school year, a frontal assault on the democratic right to education is unfolding across the United States. This attack, spearheaded by the Trump administration, is a key part of the ruling oligarchy's subversion of democracy, its construction of a dictatorship and the subordination of society to a rapidly metastasizing world war.

Public education is a product of the Enlightenment, the American Revolution, the Civil War and long years of class struggle. The oligarchy's attack on it is driven by three interconnected goals: the seizure of education's nearly \$1 trillion in annual spending for war and profits; the destruction of any semblance of democratic control over the schools; and the imposition of thought-control and censorship on students and educators—what the Nazi regime called *Gleichschaltung*, the “synchronization of education” with state control.

Trump's fascist program arises not just from his backward and grasping coterie—epitomized by the billionaire wrestling magnate and Secretary of Education Linda McMahon and trillionaire fascist Elon Musk—but from the ruling oligarchy as a whole. He rules on behalf of an obscenely rich layer, backed by both big business parties, which has plundered its way to the heights of the capitalist state.

The Democratic Party, which has initiated nearly every major US war of the past century, now demands victory in the war against Iran and the escalation of the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against nuclear-armed Russia. It is fully aligned with Trump in insisting that the working class must pay for war and the massive indebtedness of US government.

Democrats supply the necessary budget votes and demand austerity on the state and local levels as Trump strips billions of dollars from schools, cripples the Department of Education and guts special education. In December, a national voucher plan—a tax credit “scholarship” scheme—takes effect, escalating school privatization.

The bipartisan assault

During 2025, about 53,000 educators lost their jobs, and more than 1,000 schools were closed. More than half of the country's 50 largest school districts—most run by Democrats—are imposing layoffs, school closures, larger class sizes, cuts to academic and arts programs and the destruction of support services.

The Trump administration is eliminating the Department of Education (ED). The first Department of Education was created in 1867 as part of Reconstruction and the expansion of public education to blacks and rural Americans.

Ominously, the administration of most K–12 grant programs has been shifted to the Labor Department through interagency agreements. That single administrative act announces the class content of the entire

operation: Education is being formally re-subordinated to workforce production—children reprocessed as raw material for the labor market and the military.

In this vein, on September 3, the State Department made explicit the fusion of education with the military/security state, launching the “Foundry School,” an eight-university manufacturing-training program. It was unveiled at the Orwellian-named Donald J. Trump Institute of Peace, where Secretary of State Marco Rubio explicitly framed civilian workforce education as a matter of national security.

The cruelest attack has been directed against migrant families. ICE has detained more than 6,200 children during Trump's second term, holding an average of 226 children on any given day, and has deported more than 3,600. The democratic principle affirmed in *Plyler v. Doe* in 1982, that undocumented children cannot be denied a public education, is being attacked through raids, detention and fear even though the Supreme Court ruling has not been formally overturned.

The authoritarian transformation is accompanied by militarization. In Omaha, city police equipped 29 of 34 school resource officers with electric-shock G.L.O.V.E.s and used them twice on students. In Florida and Georgia, eight schools are preparing to pilot indoor attack drones designed to fire pepper balls and ram a target. The FY2025 National Defense Authorization Act enacted the most aggressive expansion of Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) in its history, aiming to funnel working-class youth directly into the military.

Why does the oligarchy aim to destroy public education?

1. *Money.* Public education is the largest pool of socialized spending: nearly \$1 trillion a year in K-12 alone, another \$450 billion in public higher education and a federal student loan portfolio of more than \$1.6 trillion. The ruling elites want these resources either in their bank accounts or diverted to the global wars that secure their domination.

Even more fundamentally, the United States faces state bankruptcy. Federal debt exceeds \$40 trillion, and annual net federal interest outlays exceed \$1 trillion. The ruling class must, if it is to preserve capitalism, make the working class pay for these bills—through the destruction of all social gains and through world war.

2. *The destruction of what remains of democratic input into public schooling.* Although they have long yielded to the demands of powerful corporate and political interests, an estimated 13,000 elected school boards would be eliminated if the school system was privatized. The past year has seen mass protests at local school boards across the US as parents and educators fought against layoffs and school closures. But under the voucher system, there is no pretense of democratic governance: The public is reduced to individual consumers whose only right is to shop.

3. *Ideological control.* The attack on public education is a war on very practice of education, culture, science and critical thought. The Trump administration's "Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education," sent to major universities in October 2025, is a near reproduction of the Nazi policy of *Gleichschaltung*. The compact demands that universities subordinate themselves to the "national interests" and "priorities" of the US government and calls for the political screening of international students for alleged "anti-American values."

The Department of Education has likewise established a partnership with more than 40 right-wing organizations to develop civic programming for K-12 schools. The "America 250 Civics Education Coalition" includes outright fascist forces, among them Hillsdale College, Turning Point USA, Moms for Liberty, the Heritage Foundation and PragerU. Its declared mission is to "reignite the fires of patriotism" through curriculum, federal programming and a 50-state speaking tour.

The historical analogy must be understood soberly. After Hitler took power, the April 7, 1933 Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service expelled Jewish and politically oppositional teachers and professors, initiating the subordination of education, science and culture to the Nazi state. The American ruling class is confronting the same fundamental contradiction: Democratic rights, scientific thought and historical truth stand in the way of a social order based on extreme inequality, war and authoritarian rule.

The present campaign against the teaching of slavery and racism, the banning of books, the persecution of transgender students, the censorship of opposition to the Gaza genocide and the political vetting of educators are elements of an effort to suppress the capacity of an entire generation to understand the society in which it lives and to block resistance.

The contrast reveals the class priorities of American capitalism: While the government claims there is no money for schools, the Fiscal Year 2027 military budget request approaches \$1.5 trillion. The entire Department of Education budget is only a small fraction of the Pentagon's annual resources.

The same ruling class that is waging a world war abroad is constructing a dictatorship at home. It requires schools stripped of democratic governance, teachers deprived of independence, young people habituated to surveillance and armed force and curricula purged of the historical knowledge needed to oppose capitalism.

The battles of the 2025 -2026 school year

The last school year was marked by a growing movement of educators, parents and students. Strike votes in districts across the country registered near-unanimous support in the fight against inadequate wages, skyrocketing healthcare costs and rising class sizes. Teachers rallied with their students amid national walkouts beginning in January against ICE murders and deportations. The call for a general strike was on the lips of teachers from Minneapolis to North Carolina.

But in every case, the militancy of educators was sabotaged by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA). As tens of thousands of high school students walked out to protest the ICE murders of Renée Nicole Good and Alex Pretti, the unions demanded passivity in the infamous words "Obey now, grieve later" and warned teachers that walking out was "unprotected activity."

Indeed, 2025 was marked by a conspiracy by the AFT and NEA that blocked a potentially massive movement of educators that would have eclipsed the national strike wave of 2018–2019 and provided the impetus for a national movement against the destruction of education. Throughout, the apparatus was aided by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA),

the which supplied the "left" cover that describes every betrayed struggle as a "victory."

The key battles underscore this treachery:

In Chicago, the DSA-dominated Chicago Teachers Union pushed through a "transformative" contract—the first in 15 years negotiated without even a strike vote—containing no protection against layoffs, even as the district faced a \$982 million deficit. The CTU's "Trump-proof" contract was followed by school closures, the announcement of 1,723 layoffs and an effective pay cut through unpaid furloughs.

In Philadelphia, the union leadership settled without a strike even after 94 percent had voted to walk out. The district is now closing 17 more schools.

The California Teachers Association (CTA) used a cynically misnamed "We Can't Wait" campaign to keep 80,000 teachers working without contracts for nearly a year. The CTA derailed unified action, isolated each struggle and left districts subject to Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom's fiscal stabilization cuts.

In the most significant teacher walkout, San Francisco's February 2026 strike—the first in nearly 50 years—was strangled through the joint efforts of AFT President Randi Weingarten and former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Pink slips followed within days, even as the DSA house publication *Jacobin* celebrated the "win." In Oakland, where 91 percent authorized a strike, the union imposed a deal on February 27; two days later, the school board voted to cut 421 positions, roughly 10 percent of the workforce.

Nationally, the high point of resistance to Trump's agenda among educators was in Los Angeles. Nearly 70,000 school workers were within a day of walking out together for the first time in the district's history, when the movement was strangled by the unions, in tandem with the Democrats and the DSA. Los Angeles is now reporting a \$3.6 billion deficit by 2028-29 and has adopted its fiscal stabilization plan that would eliminate 5,690 positions.

The case could not be clearer. After each contract betrayal was initialed by the union apparatus, layoffs and cuts began. The unions' deliberate sabotage of the class struggle gave the politicians, both Democrats and Republicans, a free hand to gut public education.

The unions covered their betrayal with endless "anti-Trump" lawsuits while shutting down the working class's real power through strike action. They are now pushing another public relations operation, a "May Day Strong" campaign to divert teachers' anger into support for the Democratic Party, rally foot soldiers for the midterms, and suppress strikes with the phony demand for a "general strike"... in 2028.

The way forward

Public schooling was not handed down as a gift from a benevolent ruling class. It was won through centuries of struggle: the democratic and egalitarian impulses released by the two American revolutions and the Russian Revolution; the fight against child labor; the mass labor struggles of the 1930s and 1940s; the civil rights movement; and the battles for the rights of immigrant children and students with disabilities.

Education worthy of the name tells the truth, traces cause and effect, understands history and acts consciously to improve society. It is precisely this capacity that the oligarchy fears.

To move forward, educators must draw the necessary political conclusions about the nature of the trade union bureaucracy. This layer is hostile to their interests; its top leadership earns more than \$500,000 a year (with hundreds more staffers earning several times the pay of an average educator), and its decades-long record proves that it will isolate

and betray every struggle rather than jeopardize its institutional status.

The lessons from these experiences point in one direction: Educators must form rank-and-file committees, built by workers themselves in every school and district, entirely independent of the NEA/AFT apparatus, the Democratic Party and all pseudo-left organizations tied to them. These committees—not the union bureaucracies, which function as the mechanism through which austerity is enforced—are the only organizational form through which teachers can take the struggle into their own hands.

The task begins now, in every school. Educators must form committees of militant and trusted workers, prepare and coordinate strike action across districts, reject the “May Day Strong” diversion and every appeal to the Democrats, and unite with workers everywhere fighting austerity.

These committees should join with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and link up with educators and workers worldwide facing the same struggle. We say: no layoffs, no school closures, no cuts; wages that outpace inflation; fully funded healthcare; massive hiring to end class-size and workload crises; an end to deportations and the defense of immigrant students; and the funding of public education through the expropriation of the billionaire oligarchy.

This requires the fight for socialism, which means workers taking political power, expropriating the wealth of the oligarchy and reorganizing society to meet human needs not enrich the billionaires and wage world war. The right to education cannot be defended apart from this fight against war, dictatorship and the capitalist system that produces them. The task posed at the beginning of this school year is to mobilize the working class independently to defend the democratic and social rights of the entire population, and reorganize society on the basis of human need rather than private profit.



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