

A Rouge Forum Broadside

Why Have School? Education–School–and the Resistance

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As schools open throughout the US, one typically ignored question needs to be asked in every classroom: Why have school? Why are we here?

Let's step back a moment in order to put school in its proper, social, perspective.

Schools are the centripetal organizing point of de-industrialized North American life, and much of life elsewhere. Evidence: School workers, not industrialized workers, are by far the most unionized people in the USA, more than 3.5 million union members. School unions are growing, if slowly, while industrial unions collapse, evaporate, because, in part, industry evaporates, and because industrial union leaders abandoned the heart of unionism—the contradictory interests of workers and employers. Nearly one-half of the youth in high school today will be draft-eligible in the next seven years.

What is going on in schools?

The demagogue, Obama, invaded US schools with his Race to the Top (RaTT) project personified by Chicago's education huckster Arne Duncan. The RaTT speeds what was already happening in capital's schools and adds a few factors for spice.

The RaTT's predecessor, a bi-partisan project touted by Democrats and Republicans alike called the No Child Left Behind Act had at least these key factors:

- (1) The development of a regimented national curriculum to promote nationalism;
- (2) High stakes standardized tests to promote segregation and ignorance through with a pretense of scientific backing; and
- (3) the militarization of schools in poor and working class areas.

The RaTT makes logical extensions:

- Sharpened demands for a national curriculum in more subjects (beyond literacy and math),
- merit pay based on student test scores,
- attacks on all forms of tenure (made palatable to the public because they know through experience that there is no shortage of incompetents in schools),
- Layoffs, hits on pay and benefits, increases in class size,
- Tuition hikes driving youth out of college with razor-like precision, typically rooted in inherited wealth.
- Some privatization, but hardly only privatization (the corporate state reflects both the unity and contradictions internal to the ruling classes who have

different short term views of profitability).

- Calls for national service setting up a syphon for middle class opposition to a draft.
- Intensified moves into cities and schools in crisis, like Detroit, demonstrating the contradictory goals of social control and profiteering.
- Ruthless competition between school districts and states for limited RaTT reward dollars.
- A harsh rule of fear and intimidation sweeping across all of capitalist schooling.

Fear seems to be the core emotional value in schools today.

What is the social context of school?

The education agenda is a class war agenda, and an imperialist war agenda. One begets the other.

Let us tick off the emerging realities of our times; the results of the many crises of capital contradicted by the promises of democracy.

The coming and recent elections should not only be studied as how voters chose who would most charmingly oppress the majority of the people from the executive committee of the rich, the government. It should be studied, more importantly, as how an element of capitalist democracy, the spectacle of elections, speeded the emergence of fascism as a mass popular force; that is:

- the corporate state, the rule of the rich, near complete merger of corporations and government;
- the continuation of the suspension of civil liberties (as with renditions);
- the attacks on whatever free press there is;
- the rise of racism and segregation (in every way, but especially the immigration policies);
- the promotion of the fear of sexuality as a question of pleasure (key to creating the inner slave), and the sharpened commodification of women (Sarah Palin to pole dancers);
- the governmental/corporate attacks on working peoples' wages and benefits (bailouts to merit pay to wage and benefit concessions);
- intensification of imperialist war (sharpening the war in Afghanistan sharpens war on Pakistan which provokes war on Russia, etc, and the US is NOT going to leave Iraq's oil);
- the promotion of nationalism (all class unity) by, among others, the union bosses,
- teaching people the lie that someone else should interpret reality and act for us, when no one is going to save us but us;
- trivializing what is supposed to be the popular will to vile gossip, thus building cynicism—especially the idea that we cannot grasp and change the world, but also debasing whatever may have been left of a national moral sense;
- increased mysticism (is it better to vote for a real religious fanatic or people who

fake being religious fanatics?); and

– incessant attacks on radicals, isolating, discouraging, surveilling, and in some cases jailing those who not only practice radicalism, but who theorize to the root analysis.

Capitalist schooling exists within these social rising circumstances

Whose schools are these? These are capital's schools.

This is, again, a capitalist democracy in which capital dominates democracy at every turn (bankster bailout, the auto-takeover on behalf of stockholders while auto workers' lives were gutted, empire's wars, etc).

Schooling is not education, the latter a "leading out," the former, schooling, a fetishized form of mis-education.

The capitalist market necessarily creates pyramid-like inequality, not only in the pocket, but in the mind.

Is there a single public school system in the US? Actually, there is not. There are five or six carefully segregated school systems, based mostly on class and race.

The image of education in the minds of philanthropic economists is this: "Every worker should learn as many branches of labor as possible so that if...he is thrown out of one branch, he can easily be accommodated in another." (Marx)

There is a pre-prison school system in much of Detroit, Michigan or Compton, California; a pre-Walmart system in National City, California; a pre-craft worker system in City Heights, California; a pre-teacher or social worker system in Del Cero, California; a pre-med or pre-law system in Lajolla, California and Birmingham, Michigan; and a completely private school system where rich people send their kids, like George W. Bush or Mitt Romney—or the Obama kids.

Rich schools teach different realities using different methods from poor schools. In rich schools the outlook is: "This globe is ours; let us see how we can make it act." In the poorest schools, the outlook is, "Tell me what to do and I will do it."

What are schools designed to do?

Schools are huge multi-billion dollar markets where profit and loss influences almost everything.

Consider the buses, the architects, textbook sales, consultants, the developers for the buildings, the upkeep, the grounds, the sports teams, salaries, etc. Cost is always an issue in school. This is, after all, capitalism (a maneuver drawn from dialectical materialism, abstracting, looking to history—the Church—and locating school in its historical place: capitalist schooling).

The average salary for public school teachers in 2006–07 was \$50,816, about 3 percent higher than in 1996–97, after adjustment for inflation . Salaries of public school teachers have generally maintained pace with inflation since 1990–91. (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009)

Multiply \$50,816 by the total number of school workers, above. That’s a tidy sum.

These relatively good salaries, in comparison to the crash of industrial wages and jobs, served as a bribe to educators, winning them to conducting the child abuse that is high-stakes exams and regimented curricula, for example. But, as economic break-downs caused by overproduction and war evaporated at least some of the ability to make the pay-off—and as school workers became more and more alienated from each other, their communities and students, through those same processes—the bribes and jobs began to vanish—as we witness today.

There is, in schools unlike most factories, a tension between elites’ desire for social control and profitability. This can be seen in the contradictions within elite groups about the privatization of schools.

It can also be seen in the liberal and unionite response to the current school milieu: “Defend Public Education!”

This is to defend a myth, on the one hand, to wish to harken back to non-existent halcyon days of schooling when it was not teaching lies, not segregated, and truly public. On the other hand, the false demand is designed to treat schools like middle class job banks, to lure school workers into attempting to tax the rest of the working class to “win,” the further mis-education of their children—as did the California Teachers Association in 2009 with a ballot measure that failed, deservedly, by 2/3rds.

Better to “Transform Schooling!” or “Rescue Education from the Ruling Classes!”

More answers to why have school:

Skill and ideological training. Under skill training we might list, of course, “the three r’s,” along with music, art, athletics, theater, science, etc. That list comes fast and easy.

But ideological training is another thing. Ideological grooming would include nationalism (the daily salute to the flag, school spirit, etc.) as well as the training in viewpoints established by teaching distinct curricular substance in the segregated schools, using different methods. Beyond nationalism, one clear purpose of most schooling is to make the system of capital natural, almost invisible, and to present it as the highest, last, stage of human development. Further, students must become so stupefied that they see no real contradiction between nationalism and the other central tenet of capitalist thought: individualism. Me! Education, necessarily a social effort, becomes an individual commodity, often in the form of test scores, used as a weapon for merit pay and, by realtors, to fix home values.

The upshot of capitalist schooling is that many students, surrounded by the unsystematic, incoherent, mystical world-views of both the curricula and most teachers, come away learning not to like to learn. Curiosity, a birthright of all children, gets crushed. Parallel to that dubious success, children in exploited areas learn they cannot understand or alter the world. So, people in pacified areas become instruments of their own oppression.

Baby-sitting and warehousing kids.

Babysitting is a key role played by capitalist schools. One way to find out, “Why have school?” is to experiment; close them. In our case, teacher strikes serve as a good test subject. In school strikes (no sane union shuts down a football program), the first people to begin to complain are usually merchants around middle schools—who get looted. The second group is the parents of elementary students, quickly followed by their employers. (These realities can help demonstrate to elementary educators their potential power along with setting up kids’ entire world views). The baby-sitting role is, again, funded by an unjust tax system and serves as a giant boon to companies that refuse to provide day care for their employees—but are able to duck taxes as well.

Schools fashion hope: Real and false. On one hand it is clear that societies where hope is foreclosed foster the potential of mass uprisings: France in the summer of 1968 is a good example of what can happen; uprisings starting in school and quickly involving the working classes nearly overthrew the government.

Real hope might be found in showing kids we can comprehend and change the world, collectively, and teaching them how. Ask, “Why are things as they are?” every day. Or, in demonstrating that we are responsible for our own histories, but not our birthrights. Must we be lambs among wolves? Does what we do matter?

False hope might be the typical school hype: Anyone can make it, all you must do is work hard. Trumpery. Inheritance is, more than ever, the key to understanding social mobility, or immobility.

To the contrarians: there is nothing unusual about elites picking off children of the poor, educating them, and turning them back on their birth-communities as a form of more gentle rule. Obama would be one example of such a success. Skanderberg, the Albanian rebel trained by the Turks, would be a failure.

Schools create the next generation of workers, warriors, or war supporters.

Automatons or rebels, or something in between, a process with some witting direction. Those workers need to be taught to accept hierarchy, to submit, to misread realities like class war and endorse nationalism (school spirit) or racism (segregated schooling products). They need to accept their lot, to be unable to notice why things are as they are; why some live in abundance while others have no work—when there is plenty of work to do—why drudgery is so much part of most jobs. The core project here: obliterate the possibility of class consciousness.

What of the resistance. People will fight back because they must. But the traditional organizations of resistance failed both the pedagogical project at hand, that is, teaching people why things are as they are, how to develop strategy and tactics on their own, and the practical project of direct action, control of work places and communities. While people must resist, it is vital they grasp: Why?

Let us make another tick-list, this time about the school unions:

*No leader of any major union in the US believes that working people and employers have, in the main, contradictory interests, thus wiping out the main reason most people believe they join unions. The bosses (for that is what they are) of the two education unions (the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers-AFL-CIO--by far now the largest unions in the USA) openly believe in what former NEA president Bob Chase called "New Unionism," the unity of labor bosses, government, and corporations, "in the national interest." There is nothing new about company unionism, however, nor the corporate state.

Company unionism produces spectacles like the AFT, the smaller of the school unions, to invite Bill Gates, dead-set on capitalist schooling, to be the key-note speaker to the 2010 AFT convention.

*Union bosses recognize their own opposing interests to the rank and file. The union tops, after all, earn a lot more than school workers. Past NEA president, Reg Weaver, took in \$686, 949, in his last year of office. Current president, Dennis Van Roekel, will make at least \$450,000. Power in the unions is vertical, top-down, perfectly clear in the structure of the AFT, somewhat disguised, but every bit as real in NEA.

These mis-leaders who move up fairly slowly through a hierarchy learn a variety of strategies to manipulate people and, "protect the contract." These maneuvers, like grievance procedures, move workers away from the locus of their power, the work place, to geographically distant spaces where "neutral" arbitrators decide on vital issues. But the unions rarely file cases to arbitration and, nevertheless, lose about 2/3 of the cases they file. Union bosses also divert member action to the ballot box--any place away from the job site--where, in the words of one top NEA organizer, "if voting mattered, they wouldn't let us do it." But electoral work keeps member volunteers busy and it reinforces the false notions school workers have about professionalism (professionals set their own hours and wages, they determine the processes of work--teachers typically are called professionals by people asking the workers to buy textbooks for their kids), allowing educators to win hollow "respect," the chance to dress up and rub elbows with Important People, away from school.

*Corruption is endemic in the AFT where a steady stream of leaders have been jailed, not only for looting the treasury (Miami, D.C.) but also for child-rape (Broward, Florida). NEA hasn't suffered the kind of dramatic jailings AFT suffers, but, for example, my own boss in Florida, where I worked as an NEA organizer, was convicted of embezzling about \$1/4 million from the union.

*The school unions draw on a member base that is about 90% white and reflect the racism that such a base inherently creates. Rather than fight to integrate the teaching force, the unions urge more and more “education” classes, adding on expenses for students, meaning those with the least get shaved out with razor sharp precision—by class and race.

*The unions, like all US unions, do not unite people, but divide them along lines of job, race, years of tenure, staff and leaders from rank and file, that is, down to the narrowest interest—capital’s favorite question: What about me?

*Since the mid-1970's, union bosses have supported every measure that elites used to regain control of schools which were, in many cases out of control. The NEA and AFT bosses today support curricular regimentation, high stakes racist exams, the militarization of schooling, merit pay, and charter schools (a key new source of dues income).

*The AFT organized the decay and ruin of urban education in the US, while the mostly suburban NEA let urban schooling be devastated, failing to recognize the truth of the old union saw, “an injury to one only goes before an injury to all.” That both unions steeped themselves in volumes of forms of racism (racist exams, racist expulsions, racist segregation, etc) should not go unnoticed or excused.

*The education unions serve to peddle the wage labor of education workers as a commodity to employers and to guarantee labor peace. In this context, there is a direct trade off: no strikes or job actions in exchange for guaranteed dues income, the check-off. That is precisely the historical origin of the agency shop. It is also a big reason why union bosses obey court injunctions against job actions; threats to the union’s bank account, that is, the union staff salaries.

*School unions attack the working class as a whole. The most recent example (May 2009) of this was the support the California Teachers Association and the NEA gave to a series of ballot propositions that would have dramatically raised the taxes of poor and working people while leaving corporations and the rich off the hook, again. NEA and CTA combined spent more than \$12.2 million dollars on the campaigns, and lost overwhelmingly. CTA-NEA demonstrated to poor and working families that organized teachers are enemies—yet those same people are educators’ most important allies.

*These are the empire’s unions. Top leaders are fully aware that a significant portion of their sky-high pay is made possible by the empires adventures. NEA and AFT bosses work with a variety of international organizations on behalf of US imperialism. These adventures are frequently deadly as with the AFT’s unwavering support for Israeli Zionism, support for the recent oil wars, and, precisely to the point, work throughout the world with the National Endowment for Democracy, a Central Intelligence Agency front, in wrecking indigenous leftist worker movements. While the AFT has been the spearhead of US imperialism inside the wholly corrupt “labor movement,” NEA has also been deeply involved. There is a long history to this, back to World War I and the AFL’s support for that horrific war. The theory behind it: US workers will do better if foreign workers do worse.

Unlike the private sector where less than 10% of the people belong to unions, school workers are the most unionized people in the country. It follows that it is important for change agents to be where the people are. But one must keep one toe in and nine toes out of the unions.

The Resistance

There are some indications that resistance inside the unions, and out, is rising. In Chicago, a recent election threw out the past, sold-out, union leadership. The CORE caucus organized for months, inside schools but, importantly, in communities among students and parents. New president Karen Lewis may serve as a beacon for future union reformers, should she overcome the temptations of office, the hierarchical union structure, the patch-work nature of the CORE foundations, and the full-scale attack that will be surely launched on CORE over time.

The ongoing public workers' strike in South Africa, a true class battle that includes the entire public work force (educators too) versus the Quisling African National Congress government might serve as an inspiration, if any US media covered it. They do not. Word, however, does slip out.

On March 4th, 2010, masses of students, school workers, and community people organized under banners that said, "Educate! Agitate! Organize! Strike! Occupy! Teach-in!" Their actions, which included building seizures, express-way sit-downs, walk-outs, rallies, marches, and freedom schooling, varied from area to area but the connection of capitalism/war/racism/class war was made in every case I saw.

The organizers then called for similar actions on October 7th and a national conference in San Francisco in late October.

In the interim, the expert dis-organizers from the unions, the Democratic Party, and the usual sects showed up. As I write, with radical students only now returning to campuses, the movement veered from its radical beginnings to the reactionary call, "Defend Public Education," and mobilizing to get out the vote—rather like urging people into church where they know their children will be raped, where they are expected to tithe, but it's all for the common good—some day.

What can be done now?

People can be told that this is capitalism,

- that there is a connection between capitalism and imperialism,
- that the key reasons for the attacks on working people and schools are rooted in those two,
- the education agenda is a class war agenda and an imperialist war agenda,
- that the government is an executive committee and armed weapon of the ruling class and there they work out their differences, allowing us to choose which one of them will oppress us best,
- that the overwhelming majority of union bosses have chosen the other side in what is surely a class struggle and the union hacks gain from the wars

and capital by supporting those wars, winning high pay and benefits, and betraying workers, they're a quisling force,
- that we can build a social movement that rejects the barriers US unionism creates, from job category to industry to race and sex and beyond.

The core issue of our time is the reality of endless war and rising inequality met by the potential of mass, active class conscious resistance.

We can fight to rescue education from the ruling classes

Everything negative is in place for a revolutionary transformation of society (distrust of leaders, collapse of moral suasion from the top down, financial crises, lost wars, massive unemployment, booming inequality, imprisonment of only the poor, growing reliance on force to rule, eradication of civil liberties, corruption and gridlock of government at every level, etc.) What is missing is the passion, generalization, organization, and guiding ethic to make that change. Time is short.

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