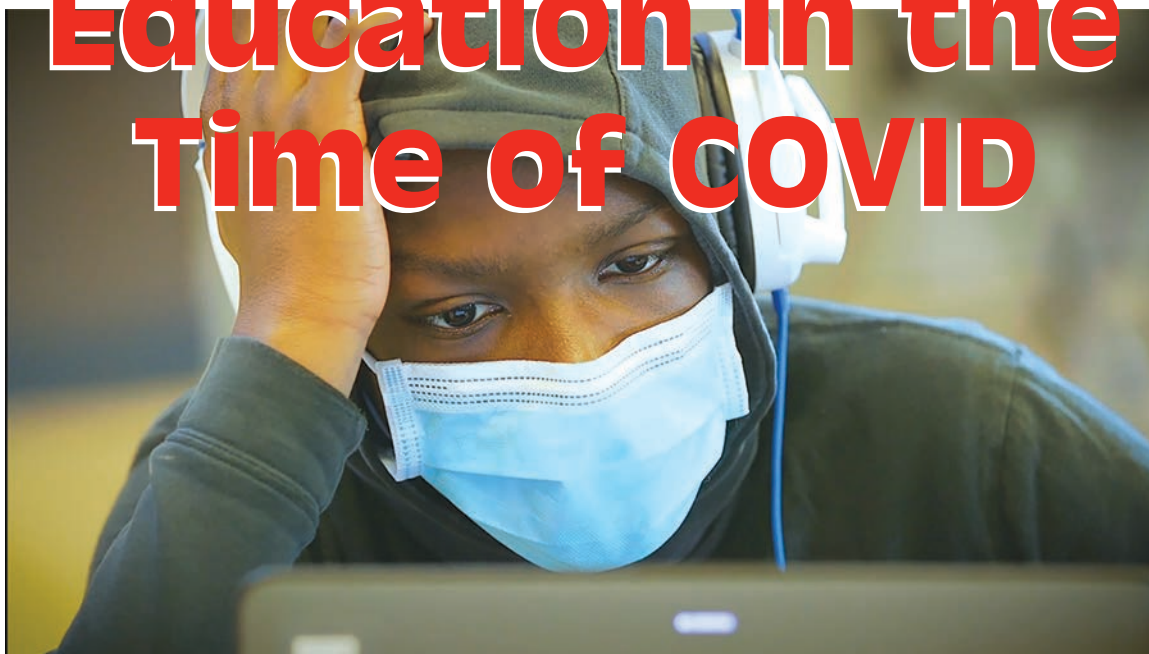


# Marxism & Education

Journal of  
Class Struggle  
Education Workers

No. 6 \$2 €  
January 2022

## Education in the Time of COVID



Casey Madison / Tacoma Public Schools

## Use Union Power to Make Schools Safe



Internationalist photo

Diary of a Mad Teacher . . . . 49  
Zoom School is Not Education:  
Welcome to Google Hell . . . 52

Implicit Bias, Inc. . . . . 28  
Marxism, Education and  
Women's Liberation. . . . . 73

*Special:* Fight Racist "Anti-CRT" Gag Laws! . . . . . 8-19  
Marxism and "Critical Race Theory" . . . . . 20-27

## In this issue...

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Use Union Power to Keep Schools<br>Open Safely .....  | 3  |
| Integrate New York City Schools! .....  | 7  |
| Mobilize to Fight Racist "Anti-CRT"<br>Gag Laws! .....  | 8  |
| The 1776 Report: Whitewashing U.S. History ....   | 14 |
| The 1619 Project: Misidentifying the<br>Roots of Racism .....   | 16 |
| Revolutionary Integrationism<br>vs. "Critical Race Theory" .....  | 20 |
| Implicit Bias, Inc. ....  | 28 |
| Straight Talk About "Privilege"<br>and Oppression .....   | 35 |
| Interview with Vera John-Steiner on<br>Vygotsky and Language, Marxism and<br>Other Topics, Part 2 ..... | 37 |
| The Fight Over Reopening Schools<br>Is a Class Battle.....  | 42 |
| Diary of a Mad Teacher .....  | 49 |
| "Zoom Schools" Are Not Education:<br>Welcome to Google Hell .....                                       | 52 |
| Google + D.O.E. + de Blasio & Cuomo =<br>Capitalist CHAOS .....   | 53 |
| Chaotic Reopening of NYC Schools:<br>This Is What Mayoral Control Looks Like ....                       | 56 |
| Chicago Teachers in the Eye of the Storm.....   | 61 |
| Chicago Mayor Tries to Bully Teachers:<br>"Show Up or Showdown" .....                                   | 66 |
| Bolivia: The Struggle for the<br>Miners' Archive.....   | 67 |
| Bolivia: Education and Revolution .....   | 71 |
| Marxism, Education and<br>Women's Liberation .....  | 73 |
| Class Struggle Education Workers:<br>Who We Are and What We Stand For .....                             | 78 |
| Why Cops and Their "Unions" Have<br>No Place in the Labor Movement.....                                 | 79 |
| Front page: Homeless student doing remote classes<br>in Tacoma, WA community center, fall 2020.         |    |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Minneapolis Public Schools<br>Give Cops the Boot..... | 81 |
| Victory to the Columbia<br>Grad Workers Strike! ..... | 86 |
| Columbia Strike Wins,<br>More Struggles Ahead .....   | 88 |

## In This Issue of *Marxism & Education*

The last two years have been dominated by the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic and by struggles over systemic racism, both of which have had public education as a focal point. Several articles in this journal deal with the chaotic reopening of schools following shutdowns, flipflopping between remote and "hybrid" classes (see pages 49-55). While many in teachers unions pushed to keep schools closed, Class Struggle Education Workers declared that "remote education" is an oxymoron, and a disaster especially for the most vulnerable students, and called to bring out union power to safely reopen schools and keep them open (see pages 3-6, 42-48 and 56-66).

Following the millions-strong protests against racist police terror in May-August 2020, there has been a racist backlash. One result has been a wave of bans on "Critical Race Theory" in schools that in reality outlaw or censor any teaching of the truth about the ingrained racism of U.S. capitalism. CSEW calls to mobilize to fight the racist gag laws, while an in-depth analysis of the actual theory (see page 20) and its concrete expressions (see page 28) underlines that this is a product of (and acceptance of) the defeat of liberal integrationism. Rightists label "CRT" Marxist, but genuine Marxists fight instead for the program of revolutionary integrationism.

Part 2 of the interview with Vera John-Steiner on the Soviet developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky (pages 37-41) underlines that battles over education are inseparable from the broader struggle against social oppression in capitalist society. This fundamental point also comes to the fore in the articles on the fight of miners and teachers against repressive regimes in Bolivia (pages 67-72), as well as in the presentation on Marxism, education and women's liberation, from Brazil to Cuba (pages 73-77).

### CLASS STRUGGLE EDUCATION WORKERS

Visit the CSEW at <http://edworkersunite.blogspot.com>

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No. 6



January 2022

# Use Union Power to Keep Schools Open Safely

By Class Struggle  
Education Workers/UFT

JANUARY 12 – At the beginning of this school year (2021-22), in-person instruction was the norm in public schools throughout the country, even as the COVID-19 pandemic continued. The fall surge of the more virulent Delta variant of the coronavirus, causing more severe illness in adults, led to an increase in hospitalization of children, but except episodically in particular schools, it did not result in extensive shutdowns. Vaccination mandates for school staff and the beginning of childhood vaccination (from age 5 up) in November played an important role in this, as the vaccines are all overwhelmingly effective in preventing serious disease. Now with the far more contagious Omicron variant, whose incidence is reportedly reduced by some vaccines but not prevented by any, the spread of COVID among children and school-age youth has increased greatly. While many of those infected do not show symptoms, or experience a milder case, this has caused much justified worry among educators, parents and students.

This concern has been seized on by some in the teachers unions to push to return to “remote education,” possibly for an extended period of time until the current high levels of infection are past. *Calling to close the schools is a huge mistake. It does not protect teachers, it will almost certainly increase infections among students, and it plays into the hands of enemies of public education.* This includes not only Trump Republicans but also Biden Democrats like the mayors of New York City and Chicago, Eric Adams and Lori Lightfoot. These forces, who back charter schools and are out to break the power of the teachers unions, are angling to mobilize parents against teachers on a program of keeping the schools open. Instead, Class Struggle Education Workers calls to *use union power to keep schools open safely*. That includes, first and foremost, demanding a *drastic reduction in class sizes*, entailing *hiring thousands of new teachers, custodians, counselors and nurses*; and requiring *frequent testing of all in the schools*. That’ll cost big bucks? You bet. Want the schools open? Find the money!

On the danger of COVID spreading in the schools, multiple



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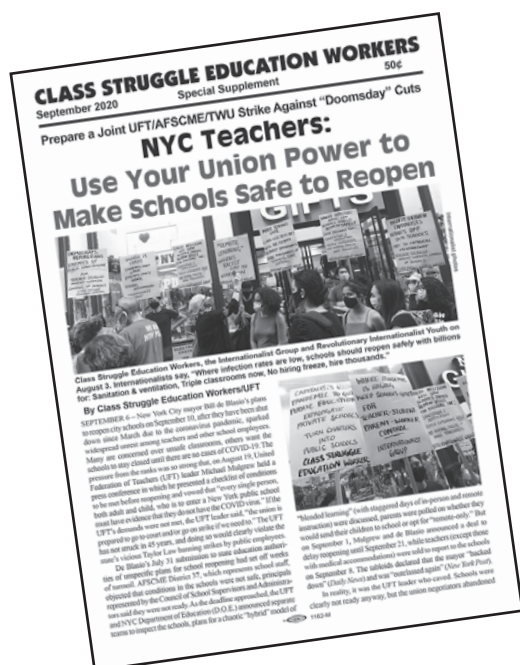
**Class Struggle Education Workers outside United Federation of Teachers headquarters, January 10. Keep schools open safely, with smaller class sizes and frequent testing of everyone.**

studies show that “SARS-CoV-2 transmission among students is relatively rare, particularly when prevention strategies are in place.”<sup>1</sup> No multi-site studies have shown an increase in childhood infections associated with the opening of schools. In fact, in the U.S. last fall the rate of child COVID infections fell steeply (by 60%) from the moment schools reopened.<sup>2</sup> All fall infections in NYC schools were quite low, not just according to the deeply flawed D.O.E. “random” testing results but also in the somewhat more reliable daily count of students absent because of COVID. The current number of students with reported COVID cases is under 1% of total enrollment (1.1 million), while daily school attendance is back up to 76%. And many if not most of those infections took place when school was out of session over the winter break. Even if there is an undercount, provided that the necessary measures are taken to make schools safe, to shut down the system when 99% of students are not ill with COVID is

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Science Brief: Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in K-12 Schools and Early Care and Education Programs – Updated (17 December 2021).”

<sup>2</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics and Children’s Hospital Association, *Children and COVID-19: State Data Report*, 30 December 2021. From the same report: in New York City, the total number of deaths from COVID of children and youths under the age of 18 since the start of the pandemic is 29.





**CSEW special supplement on reopening of NYC schools. Price: \$1 (includes postage). To order, send check/money order to Mundial Publications, Box 3321, New York, NY 10008 U.S.A.**

wrong. The task at hand is to undertake those measures.

The bottom line is that schools are not a major source of COVID infection. On the other hand, the *disastrous effects of virtual classes* on students' education, as well as on mental health and social development, particularly for the most vulnerable, is so well-known and documented, that there is no need to dwell on it here.<sup>3</sup> Every educator knows from their own experience that getting real student involvement when teaching to 30+ faceless screens is well-nigh impossible. As we have said from the outset, "remote education" is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. *Education is social* (Vygotsky). And the stark fact is that if youths are out on the street more, or at home (or a homeless shelter?!), they will be *more* exposed to infection than in school where preventive public health measures can be taken. Yes, a number of teachers may be at particular risk because of underlying health conditions or for other medical-related reasons. They must receive appropriate medical accommodations instead of the usual run-around and harassment from the NYC Department of Education. But that does not require shutting down the schools.

Already at the start of the last school year, Class Struggle Education Workers put forward a "Class-Struggle Program to Reopen New York City Schools Safely."<sup>4</sup> This included demands for *billions for sanitation and ventilation improve-*

<sup>3</sup> See "Chaotic Reopening of NYC Schools: This Is What Mayoral Control Looks Like" (23 February 2021) on page 56 of this issue of *Marxism & Education*.

<sup>4</sup> CSEW supplement, *NYC Teachers: Use Your Union Power to Make Schools Safe to Reopen* (September 2020).

*ments, tripling the number of classrooms and hiring thousands of teachers and staff.* We called to drastically *lower class sizes to 10-15 tops*, and at every school for *union-led safety committees to approve reopening*. We demanded *cops out of the schools* and *against mayoral dictatorship, for teacher-student-parent-worker control of the schools*. One modification we would make is that even in localities and at times where community infection rates are high, experience has shown that *if rigorous mitigation measures are enforced*, schools can remain open safely. Such measures can include temporarily going remote for a limited period at particular schools where there is an outbreak. That is very different from shutting down the whole system for a period that could extend for many weeks.

Now that safe vaccines are available for all adults, youths and children age 5 years and up, the CSEW is for *obligatory vaccination for COVID-19 for everyone in the schools* (teachers, staff, students, vendors, administrators) as a necessary public health measure. There must be *no religious exemptions*, and any medical exemptions for specific health conditions can be addressed with existing procedures and forms. Schools are environments where large numbers of people interact and rigid social distancing is not possible, although every effort must be made to ensure safe distances wherever possible, particularly in classrooms. All students are already required to be vaccinated for measles, mumps, rubella (German measles), varicella (chicken pox), polio, diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis, hepatitis-B, and in upper grades against meningococcal disease. As educators we support and help enforce such public health requirements, which are vital to the safety of all. All the more so in the case of the potentially fatal disease of COVID-19.

Additionally, given the high contagiousness of the Omicron variant, *frequent widespread testing in the schools is essential*. Weekly PCR screening testing should be greatly expanded to sizeable random samples drawn from *everyone* in every school, with no "opt-in" requirement of parental consent. Potential outbreaks can be forestalled by instituting *rapid (antigen) tests for all*, weekly or twice-weekly and upon returning from mid-winter and spring breaks.<sup>5</sup> Particularly given the near collapse of the Situation Room in December, there should be *union-led safety committees at every school* to take charge of testing and contact tracing and, where necessary, to *decide on classroom or school closures*, according to criteria and protocols agreed to by the unions.<sup>6</sup> This obviously means substantially increasing the number of school nurses and assistants. The defective air purifiers the Department of Education (D.O.E.) bought from the lowest bidder must be replaced by *larger-capacity, high-quality HEPA-filter machines for proper ventilation*. And the schools must provide *sanitary, functioning bathrooms*.

<sup>5</sup> Los Angeles schools required PCR tests for everyone in the schools – no parental "opt in" or "opt out" excuses – at the beginning of the school year and now in January.

<sup>6</sup> This was included in the recent settlement between the Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Teachers Union.

But the most effective measure by far for ensuring the safety of students and educators alike in the long run is **sharply reduced class sizes**, which is also key to students' educational achievement, socialization and emotional well-being. With classes of 25-33 students, a teacher simply cannot give the individual personal attention needed to deal with the myriad problems of students in New York City where three-quarters are from low-income families, two-thirds are black and Hispanic, one in five have disabilities, one in seven are English language learners and more than one in ten are homeless.<sup>7</sup> In surveys, parents have for years listed smaller class sizes as their no. 1 demand, as have teachers and students. Moreover, as Leonie Haimson of Class Size Matters emphasized in testifying before the NYC City Council last October 27, New York's highest court ruled in 2003 in the Campaign for Fiscal Equality (CFE) suit that the state had illegally shortchanged New York City schools by billions of dollars, so "that NYC schools have excessive class sizes, and that class size affects learning," and ordered restitution.

Yet ever since the 2008 economic crisis, the state has continued to underfund New York City schools, while "class sizes have risen in NYC public schools, especially in the early grades, and are 15-30% larger than those in the rest of the state" (CSM testimony). Haimson was testifying in favor of Intro 2374, which would raise the space requirement for classrooms from 20 to 35 square feet per student, resulting in a maximum

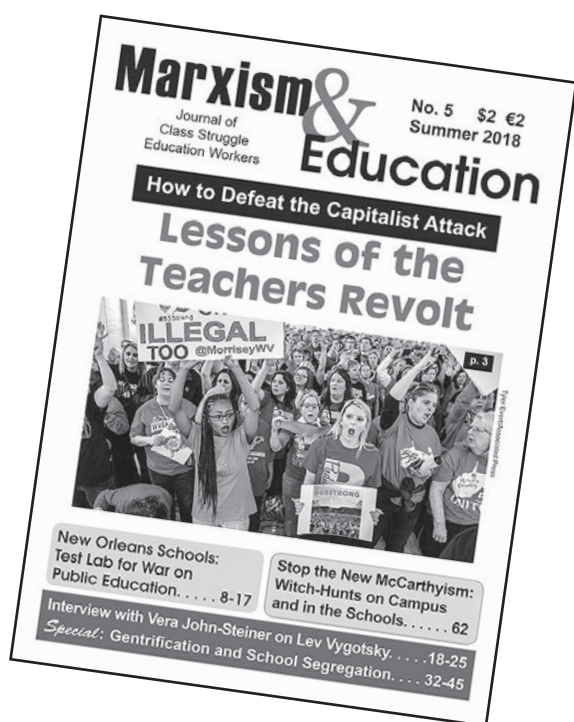
<sup>7</sup> NYC DOE enrollment statistics and Advocates for Children of New York, "More than 101,000 New York City Students Experienced Homelessness in 2020-21" (8 November 2021).

class size of around 19 students. This is more than the 10-15 students per teacher per class in elite NYC private schools, but would certainly make a qualitative difference both in health and educational terms. But even though it was *sponsored by 41 of the 51 members* of the overwhelmingly Democratic city council, the initiative was allowed to die in committee, due to resistance from Mayor Bill de Blasio and the council speaker. Haimson emphasized that for once the city has the money in hand to pay for it, with billions in extra federal and state aid, as well as foundation aid funds under the CFE lawsuit. Yet the NYC D.O.E with its bloated bureaucracy refuses to spend the money to lower class sizes.

The CSEW says there should be a **concerted union-led drive to force the drastic lowering of class sizes** and the **hiring of tens of thousands more teachers and staff** – including, if necessary, **strike action** to get it. Instead of calling to close the schools and to resort to impossible "remote education" out of fear of COVID, which would give reactionary forces an opening to mobilize working-class and middle-class families against the teachers unions, as they have done elsewhere in the country, a campaign for lower class sizes organized by **union-led councils of teachers, students, parents and workers** would win broad and enthusiastic support. It could even help undercut resistance to mask and vaccination mandates, and to school integration. Right now, amid the pandemic, educators and their allies have the capitalists, their politicians and educrats over a barrel. You want the schools open safely? Then lower class sizes. Do it now. This is the time for defenders of public education to go all out and *win*.

But to successfully wage that battle will be a big political fight against powerful forces. The new NYC mayor, black ex-cop Democrat Eric Adams, is trying to bully educators ... and anyone else who gets in his way. In the election campaign he ran on an "anti-crime" platform, saying he was going to "show America how to run a city." Against anti-racist protesters who denounced police brutality, he opposed cutting the New York Police Department budget and opposed the city council bill banning chokeholds, passed after the cop murder of Eric Garner in 2014 but overturned by the courts. He has called to bring back the racist police tactic of "stop and frisk," which was used overwhelmingly against African American and Latino youths. He opposes eliminating bail for minor crimes. He has vowed to reintroduce solitary confinement at the Rikers Island prison hellhole, and haughtily announced that he would ignore a letter from a majority of the city council, including the new black speaker, Adrienne Adams, denouncing this form of torture. This Democratic cop mayor wants to run New York City like a police state.

On the schools, former Republican Eric Adams still praises the policies of then-Republican billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg, who exacerbated educational segregation in the name of "school choice" and pushed one anti-teacher "reform" after another. Like Bloomberg, Adams supports privatizing "charter schools," and received millions in campaign donations from them and their Wall



**Marxism & Education No. 5, the journal of Class Struggle Education Workers. Price: \$3 (includes postage). To order go to [www.internationalist.org/orderhere.html](http://www.internationalist.org/orderhere.html)**

Street backers. His new schools chancellor, David Banks, has a chain of “Eagle Academies” which are run like boot camps for black young men. Banks chose as his top deputy Daniel Weisberg, who was chief teacher union-basher under Bloomberg. Eric Adams appointed as deputy mayor David Banks’ brother Philip, a former NYPD chief of department who was forced to resign in a corruption scandal featuring free trips to Israel. And on his first day in office, in response to calls to close the schools over Omicron, Adams declared that the way to fight COVID is with “swagger”: “all we did was wallow in COVID.... We need a mayor with swagger, ... we need a chancellor with swagger, we need a police commissioner with swagger.”

Well, “swagger” won’t stop a deadly virus any more than it did for tough-guy frauds like Donald Trump or Andrew Cuomo, but it does foretell tough battles ahead. Mayor Adams wants to keep police in the schools, CSEW calls for *cops out of the schools and out of the unions*. He calls to keep and expand the “gifted and talented” school program, we fight to end to this elitist, racist program and for *integrated high-quality public schools for all*. Banks has called for a longer school day and school year, and if teachers “don’t want to work all year long,” then he would look to “community-based organizations” to staff the schools. You can see the writing on the wall: they’re gearing up to rerun the 1968 NYC teachers strike to try to break the power of the union. Wall Street and its charters tried this tack under Bloomberg but failed, as black parents sided with the UFT. Now they’re going to try again, this time with a black mayor and black chancellor. You can be sure that any resistance will be labeled racist. In this high-stakes scenario, calling to keep schools closed plays right into the hands of forces seeking to gut union power.

This is exactly what black Democratic mayor Lori Lightfoot has been doing in Chicago, continuing the war on the teachers union of her predecessor, former Obama chief of staff Rahm Emanuel. In the recent stand-off that led to the schools being closed for a week, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) raised important demands for increased COVID testing, after the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) winter break do-it-yourself home testing scheme failed utterly. Faced with *no testing at all* – unlike in New York, Los Angeles and elsewhere where there was some, although inadequate in the face of Omicron – the CTU rightly refused to teach in-person. But instead of focusing on testing, it called to go remote until an arbitrary date (January 18), a counterproductive demand clearly intended to extend much longer. In the end, CTU won some increases in testing and in powers of union-majority school safety committees, but not the needed comprehensive testing, and it said nothing about class size. In the end, particularly with the CPS’ bungling, Lightfoot’s attempt to line parents up against the union failed again.

In New York City, the Movement of Rank and File Educators (M.O.R.E.), an opposition caucus in the UFT which looks to the CTU, called two rallies last week for “safe schools.” While including some supportable demands (weekly COVID testing for all, schools as vaccination sites), it focused on calls

to go “remote until Jan. 18” and for a “remote option for all.” M.O.R.E. has for months been promoting this reactionary proposal which would segregate schools by wealth, as poor and working-class families cannot afford to keep children at home. The January 10 rally outside UFT offices reeked of privilege, and the next day a M.O.R.E.-supported student walkout took place at three elite high schools (Brooklyn Tech, Bronx Science and Stuyvesant). In terms of safety, it makes no sense to close schools when the rest of the city is wide open, with parents working in grocery stores, medical facilities, public transit, restaurants, etc. With its simple trade-unionist outlook, even taking on the word “social,” M.O.R.E. ignores the fact that public school educators perform a vital service for working people.

On January 10, Class Struggle Education Workers came out to the UFT headquarters separately, and with a very different program. Our signs proclaimed “Use Union Power to Keep Schools Open Safely.” We declared “Remote Education is an Oxymoron” and called for “Vaccines, Frequent Testing for All & Union Safety Committees,” and above all, for “Smaller Class Sizes (10-15 Tops) to Keep Schools Open Safely.” CSEW and Internationalist signs demanded, “Mayor Adams, Hands Off the Schools!” “No to Mayoral Dictatorship” and “For Teacher-Student-Parent-Worker Control” while denouncing “Democrats, Republicans, Enemies of Public Education.” The fact that the UFT bureaucracy (as well as the reformist opposition groups), the D.O.E. bosses, mayor and city council are all Democrats or support the Democratic Party underscores our call for a *class struggle workers party to fight for a workers government*.

Driven by fear rather than an understanding that the COVID crisis is another battlefield in the *bipartisan capitalist war on public schools* going back to the 1980s, many teacher union activists are playing into the hands of our class enemies while missing a unique chance to push through major gains. The class struggle doesn’t stop because of rampant disease, it intensifies. The last time class sizes in New York schools were lowered was in 1938, during a tuberculosis epidemic amid an upsurge of militant labor struggle. Across the country and around the world, we are witnessing the inability of the capitalist system to provide even the basic needs of the population. Instead of containing the deadly coronavirus, as China with its collectivized economy was able to do, the watchword throughout the capitalist world was to “flatten the curve.” That meant spreading out – not stopping – infections, so that the hospitals are not overwhelmed. Today Democrats and Republicans alike declare we must “live with COVID.” Like hell.

In China, the most populous country in the world, there have been less than 5,000 deaths by COVID; in the capitalist world, 5.5 million dead, going up by another 100,000 every few weeks. Do the math. Capitalism kills. The fight for effective public health measures, and for a public education system that truly serves the interests of working people and the oppressed, must be part and parcel of the struggle for international socialist revolution. ■



# Integrate New York City Schools!

## *For Free, Equal, Quality Secular Public Education for All!*

**By Class Struggle Education Workers/UFT**

*The following CSEW statement was issued as a leaflet on 17 April 2019.*

- **No to Private Schools and Charter Schools – Turn Them Into Public Schools**
- **Abolish Competitive Admissions for Specialized High Schools**
- **Replace “Gifted and Talented” Schools and Programs with Advance Placement and Quality Academic Programs in All Schools**
- **Abolish Mayoral Control – For Teacher-Student-Parent-Worker Control of the Schools**

Class Struggle Education Workers has repeatedly emphasized that “The public schools are where race and class intersect in the U.S., a country built on a bedrock of capitalist slavery. That is why the fight for free quality education for all has been a fundamental issue since the fight for abolition.” And ever since the 2014 study by the UCLA Civil Rights Project, issued on the 60th anniversary of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* court decision ordering school integration, it has been notorious, as we headlined in the *CSEW Newsletter* (No. 4, Fall 2014), that “New York Schools Have Worst Segregation in the U.S.”

In recent weeks this vital issue has flared up again as figures were released in March showing that the numbers of African American and Hispanic students in these elite schools is tiny – less than 10%, even though they make up nearly 70% of public school students. At Stuyvesant High School, less than 1% of students are black (compared to 10% in 1971). And despite Mayor Bill de Blasio’s vow to diversify the specialized high schools, the numbers are falling. At Stuyvesant, out of 895 slots in the incoming freshman class, only 7 were offered to black students, down from 10 last year and 13 the year before. This is nothing less than institutionalized racism.

Moreover, this rigidly segregated school system is presided over by liberal Democrats. When Democratic mayor de Blasio proposed last June to scrap the discriminatory specialized high school entrance exam, there was a firestorm of opposition, and thundering silence from Democratic officials, who headed for the door. Everyone from “centrist” governor Andrew Cuomo, who has long supported privatized charter schools, to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of the Democratic (Party) Socialists of America, has tried to duck the issue. Liberal Jumaane Williams, recently elected as NYC public advocate and a graduate of Brooklyn Tech, outright opposed scrapping the test and state assembly speaker Carl Heastie has refused to take up the issue.

De Blasio, as usual, quickly backed off and effectively dropped the issue, just as he earlier abandoned any pretense of reining in the charter schools that have spearheaded privatization of the public schools. But while the mayor, his NYC



stuyvesant.edu

**Stuyvesant High School auditorium. Selective specialized high schools are necessarily discriminatory. Only 7 black students were admitted in Stuyvesant’s September 2019 freshman class.**

Department of Education and schools chancellor Richard Carranza have done next to nothing about integrating the schools, parents and educators in Districts 15 (Park Slope/Sunset Park) and District 3 in Upper Manhattan have taken the initiative to design programs that would significantly increase the number of poor, African American and Hispanic students in high-scoring, largely middle-class schools, as well as increasing the number of white students in low-scoring schools with low-income students (“Parents’ Plan Hits Goal of Integrating Schools,” *New York Times*, 16 April 2019).

Meanwhile, the United Federation of Teachers has not come out against the “de facto” segregation embodied in the specialized high schools nor the “gifted and talented” schools and programs. And as mayoral control of the schools is up for renewal the UFT supports this dictatorial regime which has produced an outrageously segregated school system. Class Struggle Education Workers calls to abolish mayoral control and for teacher-student-parent-worker control of the schools. We also point out in response to complaints that increasing the number of black and Latino students would cut the number of slots in the selective schools for Asian students, that only a few thousand of the more than 50,000 Asian high school students in New York are able to attend these elite schools.

Many liberals such as Ocasio-Cortez (whose father went to Brooklyn Tech, and whose parents moved out of the Bronx so she could attend a suburban school) try to skirt the issue of segregation by saying that all public schools should be high-caliber like the elite schools. But how is this to be achieved when public education is under bipartisan capitalist attack, with Democrats in the forefront of those pushing union-busting “education reform” and privatizing charters? Class Struggle Education Workers calls to support any effective measure to integrate the schools, including busing (which de Blasio opposes), and to abolish the competitive exams for the specialized schools, as part of a fight for free, equal, quality secular public education for all. This will require a break with the Democrats and all capitalist parties, and building a class-struggle workers party. ■

# Backlash Against Mass Protests of Racist Police Murder

# Mobilize to Fight Racist

# “Anti-CRT” Gag Laws!

**They Want to Force You to Stop Teaching About Racism**



Internationalist photo

In the summer of 2020, reacting to the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis cop, millions took to the streets to denounce racist police brutality. The campaign against “critical race theory,” initiated by Donald Trump, is a racist backlash against those protests. Above: mass meeting called by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) in Oakland, California on 19 June 2020. On Juneteenth (the celebration of the end of slavery), the ILWU shut down all ports on the U.S. West Coast to protest police terror and systemic racism.

## By Class Struggle Education Workers

SEPTEMBER 2021 – As the 2020-21 school year drew to a close, there was an explosion of laws and regulations restricting how teachers could discuss racism, sexism and other controversial issues in class. By now, some 28 states – all with Republican-controlled legislatures and/or Republican governors – have introduced bills (more than a dozen of which have been enacted) or issued state education department rulings that would outlaw teaching “divisive concepts.” Concepts prohibited from “a course of instruction” include that the United

States is a racist country (Tennessee Dept. of Ed.), that racism is embedded in American society and its legal system (Florida Board of Ed.), or even discussing anything that would cause anyone to “feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex” (Georgia Board of Ed.).

In a round-up article on this wave of racist gag laws, *Education Week* (19 July) summarized: “Republicans proposing bills like this say that teachers who discuss these topics – who suggest, for example, that Black Americans are systemically oppressed – are practicing ‘critical race theory’.” “CRT” has



Evelyn Hockstein / Reuters



**Lily-white crowd of parents swarms school board meeting in Loudoun County, Virginia, on 22 June 2020, protesting “critical race theory” and policies respecting transgender students. Loudoun was one of the last segregationist holdouts, not desegregating its schools until 1968, 14 years after Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling declared separate schools unconstitutional. Anti-“CRT” protests are the new “massive resistance” to racial equality. For mass mobilization to defeat this racist attack on public education!**

become the bugbear of conservatives, setting set off a new round of “culture wars” in the schools. In fact, the anti-“CRT” campaign has nothing to do with Critical Race Theory, which is a sub-discipline of academic/legal studies and is not taught in secondary schools. Rather, the reactionary proponents of these laws seek to prevent teachers from taking up discussion of “systemic racism” in response to the massive nationwide protests sparked by the racist police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020. In targeting “CRT,” they are trying to keep any mention of “BLM” (Black Lives Matter) out of the schools.

The current all-sided attack on “CRT” is a racist backlash on the cultural front, akin to the mobilizing-propaganda campaigns of the White Citizens’ Councils in the 1960s. The summer 2020 protests had a profound cultural effect, and the racists perceived they had lost ground. Racist cops were captured on video committing murder, monuments of the Confederacy were under physical attack across the country, people were talking about the Tulsa massacre, there were TV shows about Juneteenth, high school and middle school classes were talking about slavery and Jim Crow, and so on. It’s not Critical Race Theory they want to ward off, it’s slavery they don’t want discussed, and Jim Crow segregation, and racist cop terror today. Chris Rufo of the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, spelled out the strategy of making “CRT” a toxic buzzword to give cover to this racist reaction in a March tweet:

“We have successfully frozen their brand – “critical race theory” – into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic,

as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category.”

This was the clear purpose of Republican president Donald Trump when he issued Executive Order 13950 on 22 September 2020, which is where the language in the state laws and regulations comes from. In banning racial “diversity training” and promoting “unity” (!), the order denounced “offensive and anti-American race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating.” It listed nine “divisive concepts” that must be rooted out, including (in addition to those cited above) “meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or sexist.” The Executive Order was repealed by Democratic president Joe Biden within hours of taking office on

20 January 2021. But Trump Republicans are hellbent on upholding the ex-president’s overtly racist legacy, while Biden Democrats hide behind the (not very) covert racism of “supporting the police.”

So in Georgia, Republican governor Brian Kemp’s appointed state Board of Education unanimously resolved that “the United States of America is not a racist country, and that the state of Georgia is not a racist state” – and for a teacher to say any different is henceforth illegal. Alabama, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Montana, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee and Texas have already passed laws or issued state education department regulations or executive orders banning “CRT.” In other states, bills are pending which will set off fireworks in upcoming elections. The vagueness of the various laws and regulations is deliberate. The point is to keep this contentious issue alive until the next presidential election – in other words: it’s all about “Trump 2024.”

This raises the spectre of McCarthyite repression in the schools. At the dawn of the anti-Soviet Cold War in the late 1940s and early ’50s, right-wing Republican senator Joe McCarthy – with the connivance of Democratic liberals – launched witch hunts to ferret out “reds” from the government, schools, wherever. State laws were passed to fire any teacher deemed a “Communist.” Hundreds of teachers were purged from New York City schools alone. Today’s witch-hunting regulations list all kinds of dire consequences if they are violated. In Arizona, school districts will be fined \$5,000 and teachers could lose their licenses. In Tennessee also, a teacher could have their certification revoked, while funds

## Tennessee: From the Scopes Trial to “CRT”

In Tennessee, “prohibited concepts” also include “Promoting or advocating the violent overthrow of the United States government”; “promoting division between, or resentment of, a race, sex, religion, creed, nonviolent political affiliation, social class, or class of people”; or saying that the “rule of law” is a “series of power relationships and struggles among racial or other groups.” It’s not surprising that Tennessee has one of the more draconian laws. This was the battleground over the teaching of evolution, going back to the infamous 1925 trial of science teacher John Scopes, accused of violating the state’s Butler Act that made it illegal to teach human evolution in public schools. Amid the uproar (the trial was broadcast on nationwide radio), the fascist terrorists of the Ku Klux Klan embraced the anti-evolution cause.

It’s no accident that the nightriders and cross-burners of the KKK denounced evolution, as did the Southern Baptist Convention religious denomination that was founded in 1845 to support slavery. Hard-core racists want to deny that all humans are of African descent.<sup>1</sup> The ideological continuity of this racist reaction extended into the 1960s and beyond with the push for including anti-scientific, Christian fundamentalist “creationism” and “intelligent design” as “alternatives” to evolution in school curricula. This was a direct reaction to the civil rights movement and school integration. And it continues today with the campaign to ban any education about the roots of racism. All are a reflection of the fact that the Civil War left unfinished the struggle to root out the social and economic power of the slavocracy:

<sup>1</sup> See “Denial of Evolution Is a Form of White Supremacy,” in *Scientific American* (5 July 2021): “At the heart of white evangelical creationism is the mythology of an unbroken white lineage that stretches back to a light-skinned Adam and Eve.”



**“Hell & The High School” – Racist, anti-evolution crusaders fought tooth and nail to prevent scientific education in public schools.**

racial oppression and the racist ideology it generates are woven into the fabric of American capitalism.

At the same time, resistance to ingrained racism has been growing as the country grows more diverse. In 2009, the Southern Baptist Convention formally apologized for its support to slavery and failure to support the civil rights movement in the 1960s. This year it voted down a right-wing anti-“CRT” candidate for president and beat back a resolution against “critical race theory” – while rejecting any view that sees racism rooted in “anything other than sin” (AP, 16 June 2021).

Recently a Tennessee teacher, Matthew Hawn, was dismissed by the Sullivan County Board of Education for leading classroom discussions on anti-racist issues. Hawn, a contemporary issues teacher and baseball coach, was charged with not presenting “varying viewpoints” (the pro-racist side?!) and for assigning “inappropriate materials,” including a Ta-Nehisi Coates essay which a parent complained presented Donald Trump in a negative light (WJHL.com, 8 June 2021). Matthew Hawn has appealed his dismissal. Defenders of public education everywhere should demand that he be reinstated.

could be massively stripped (up to \$5 million, or 10% of all state aid) from any school or district that “knowingly” violates the anti-“CRT” law after a state education department investigation of parent complaints.

Now the anti-“CRT” crusade is linking up with anti-transgender, anti-vaccine and anti-masking hysteria to create an all-round toxic environment at the opening of school this fall (“Venom of Political and Culture Battles Seeps Into School

Halls,” *New York Times*, 20 August 2021). It will intersect massive learning deficits suffered by students after what has been a lost year for millions due to pandemic shutdowns and the disaster of “remote education,” particularly for the most disadvantaged students. Already there are a slew of recall campaigns by racist right-wingers against school administrators and school board members (61 at last count, against 157 officials, more than double the average over the last decade). And



given the explosiveness of these multiple issues, there could be clashes with rabid reactionaries at some of the hottest spots.

### Right-Wing Frenzy Against “Critical Race Theory”

The striking similarities between the various anti-“CRT” laws, and their sly use of liberal anti-discrimination terminology to prevent discussion of racism, come from the fact that they are based on model bills cooked up by right-wing think tanks. The “Partisanship Out of Civics Act” was drawn up by the Ethics and Public Policy Center, an ultra-rightist outfit founded by Ernest Lefever, a supporter of the racist pseudo-science propaganda of William Shockley.<sup>1</sup> This cookie-cutter legislation was concocted by one Stanley Kurtz, a senior fellow at the center and Harvard faculty member. Outlawing discussion that could cause a student “discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex” was a conscious effort to craft the laws in such a way that they could be used by parents to go after individual teachers.

Other model bills banning discussion of systemic racism come from the Heritage Foundation, Citizens for Renewing America, the Alliance for Free Citizens and the David Horowitz Freedom Center, an anti-Muslim foundation. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a linchpin of the longstanding corporate/right-wing offensive to take over state governments, held a workshop in December, attended by 20 state legislators and led by anti-“CRT” propagandist Chris Rufo of the Manhattan Institute.<sup>2</sup> ALEC, set up after the 1964 defeat of the presidential bid by Barry Goldwater, specializes in writing model state laws for repression of immigrants (Arizona), “stand your ground” laws legalizing vigilantism, and “parent trigger” laws to force school districts to permit charter schools (California and Connecticut).

The anti-“CRT” laws and orders are being pushed by right-wing groups that have sprung up over the last year. One group, No Left Turn in Education, which boasts of 30 chapters in 24 states, was founded in June 2020, explicitly in response to the mass protests against racist police murder, which led to more teaching in schools about the roots of racism. NBC News (15 June 2021) listed “at least 165 local and national groups that aim to disrupt lessons on race and gender.” In New Hampshire, the campaign against education about racism has seen fascists such as the Proud Boys, and Nazis of the “NSC 131” (Nationalist Social Club Anti-Communist Action), demonstrate outside the Nashua Board of Education with a banner saying “CRT = Anti-White.” These Nazis also staged anti-Semitic protests outside the Holocaust Museum in Boston in May.

Although billed as a rejection of “critical race theory,” the witch-hunting gag laws are aimed at banning any discussion in schools of the social roots of racial, sexual and other forms of social and class oppression. They are also avowedly

<sup>1</sup> This served as the model for the Texas law and bills in Ohio and Arizona.

<sup>2</sup> “Who’s Really Driving Critical Race Theory Legislation? An Investigation,” *Education Week*, 19 July 2021.

anti-communist. We are dealing with a concerted effort to whitewash the history of U.S. capitalism, founded on genocide of Native Americans and enslavement of African Americans, whose oppression continues to this day. With all their concern about causing distress to white racist students (and parents), these measures victimize African American, Latino, Native American and Asian students. And by banning discussion of gender issues, they reinforce the oppression of students on the basis of their gender or sexuality.

This is no abstract debate over curriculum, but an attempt at systematic regimentation of the population and *censorship of any discussion of racial oppression*. It would *grant racists veto power* over what and how curricula is taught. These laws create breeding grounds for fascist vigilantes. Most require that “alternative views” be presented. So if there is discussion of the ominous 2017 white-supremacist mobilization in Charlottesville, Virginia, where torch-bearing right-wingers chanted “Jews will not replace us” and a Nazi ran over and killed anti-racist Heather Heyer, what would be the “alternative view” – justification for fascist murder?

Public school educators are forced to walk a very fuzzy and perilous line just to keep their jobs, unclear on how to teach mandated subject matter, and what language to use without breaking the law. Meanwhile, students, parents and administrators are transformed into McCarthyite spies in this racist witch-hunt. (Don’t like your grade? Out your teacher!) They even want to make educators and parents complicit in this racist censorship by forming committees to purge texts and libraries of “prohibited concepts.” Books will be banned – is book burning next?

How this will play out is already clear. On Fox News (which has railed non-stop against “critical race theory”) ultra-rightist fanatic Tucker Carlson has called to “get cameras in every classroom ... to oversee the people teaching your children,” and to put a stop to the “civilization-ending poison” of CRT (*Newsweek*, 19 July 2021). You can bet that right-wing parents will deputize their offspring to use their cellphones to nail any teacher who so much as utters the words “systemic racism.” This racist backlash is so widespread that spokesmen for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund compare it to the “massive resistance” to the Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* school integration decision that spawned over 200 whites-only private “academies” across the South. Anti-“CRT” activists such as the founder of “No Left Turn” are pulling their children out of public schools.

The gag laws take aim at standards, curricula, lesson plans, textbooks, instructional materials and practices. In some districts, school officials have vowed to fight the racist onslaught. In Oklahoma, school superintendents in Tulsa and Millwood, with overwhelmingly black student bodies, and in Hanna, a small district most of whose students are Native Americans, have vowed that they will “Risk Breaking State Law to Continue Anti-Racism Work” (*Education Week*, 6 August 2021). The Zinn Education Project (named after Howard Zinn, author of *A People’s History of the United States*) is seeking 12,800 signatures to a pledge to “refuse to lie to young people about U.S.

history and current events,” names to be publicly posted. The teachers are brave, but this is potentially problematic, as “alt-right” web sites and fascists are doxing signers.

The racist onslaught against teaching about – or even discussing – the roots of racism *must be fought in an organized, massive way*.

Yet the two national teachers unions – American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) – have only responded weakly, largely leaving it up to local affiliates and individual teachers to fight the anti-CRT witch hunt. At its annual meeting at the beginning of July 2021, the NEA passed a resolution saying it would prepare materials to “fight back against anti-CRT rhetoric” and “convey

its support for the accurate and honest teaching of social studies topics” that would “be informed by academic frameworks ... including critical race theory.” The NEA also said it would call together with the Zinn Project for an October 14 “national day of action to teach lessons about structural racism and oppression.” Not a word about the racist gag laws – much less about fighting them – in this resolution that then disappeared from the NEA site.

Over at the AFT, union president Randi Weingarten gave a 6 July 2021 speech declaring that “culture warriors are labeling any discussion of race, racism or discrimination as CRT to try to make it toxic.” She criticized the Texas law that makes it illegal to teach that “slavery and racism are anything other than deviations from, betrayals of, or failures to live up to, the authentic founding principles of the United States.” But as far as doing anything about it, all she offered was that “our union will defend any member who gets in trouble for teaching honest history,” that it has “a legal defense fund ready to go” and is “preparing for litigation.” The AFT and NEA are *not* fighting these racist censorship laws themselves, demanding they be revoked, but instead are leaving it to individual educators to stand up and fight. That goes against the whole purpose of unions, to organize collective defense of and struggle for our rights and interests.

Around the country the anti-“CRT” campaign has led to swarming of school board meetings by hundreds of right-wingers – from Las Vegas, Nevada to Rochester, Minnesota to Loudoun County, Virginia and Cherokee County, Georgia – as they seek to bully members into approving the racist ban on education about racism. But the national teachers unions, and the educators around the Zinn Project, despite their desire to



Internationalist photo

**After the defeat of busing for desegregation in the 1970s, founders of Critical Race Theory abandoned the struggle to integrate the schools. Marxists reject the defeatist doctrine of CRT and counterpose the fight for revolutionary integrationism. We demand integrated, high-quality, public education for all. Above: Class Struggle Education Workers, Trabajadores Internacionales Clasistas and Internationalist Group at Juneteenth 2020 march in New York City.**

resist this onslaught, are not countermobilizing on the ground against the racist reactionaries. This leaves the initiative in the hands of the racists. *These racist gag laws should be shredded by mass mobilization and broken by concerted action of the education unions – backed by anti-racist and class-conscious educators, students, parents and school staff – against the whitewashing of U.S. history.*

A central reason for the failure to mobilize is the *political subordination of the unions to the capitalist Democratic Party*.<sup>3</sup> Across the U.S., teacher unions are the backbone of Democrats’ get-out-the-vote efforts. The union bureaucracy fears that direct confrontation with the Trump mobs would hurt Biden and Democratic candidates in “swing” districts, endangering the Democrats’ narrow control of Congress. Yet the Democrats are key players in the *bipartisan* bourgeois attack on public education. Unionized teachers in Republican-controlled states mobilized by the tens of thousands in the 2018 “red state revolt.” But to do so they had to overcome resistance from the pro-Democratic union tops. Class-conscious educators fight to *oust the bureaucrats, break with the Democrats and build a class-struggle workers Party*.

### **Critical Race Theory: An Anti-Marxist Program of Defeat**

Critical Race Theory itself is very different from the caricature presented by the anti-“CRT” racist reactionaries. From the mouths of Trump, Republican politicians, right-wing TV hate-mongers and “blue lives matter” apolo-

<sup>3</sup> AFT president Randi Weingarten is a member of the Democratic National Committee.



gists for police murder, “CRT” is universally described as “Marxist” or “neo-Marxist.” But Critical Race Theory is actually deeply anti-Marxist, locating the origins of racial oppression not in the racist capitalist system but in what they call “white supremacy.” By this its proponents do not mean the rule of the slavocracy of the Confederacy, or the terror of the hooded white supremacists of the Ku Klux Klan, or even the laws of the Jim Crow South but rather a society dominated by an undifferentiated mass of white people. Yet “white Americans” in general did not impose slavery, the planters, merchants and bankers did. The rulers of the U.S. are not white people in general but the owners of capital and their politicians.

Key to their rule – going back to this society’s origins and continuing today – has been the *special or double oppression* of African Americans. Against this *materialist* understanding, liberal idealists argue “as though the chief business of slavery were the production of white supremacy instead of the production of cotton, sugar, rice and tobacco” for profit, as Barbara J. Fields observed in her classic “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America” (1990).<sup>4</sup> As she notes, it was the slave plantation system that produced the ideology of race and racism in the U.S.; and it continues to be reproduced every day in capitalist America not because of some timeless disembodied power of “white supremacy” but because the material realities of racial oppression and unending social inequalities in this capitalist society continue to generate and reproduce it.

The founders of Critical Race Theory responded to the defeat of busing in the 1970s by abandoning the struggle for school desegregation.<sup>5</sup> As this defeatist theory gained circulation in academia, the common language in the field of education has shifted to reflect it. Instead of fighting for *integration*, the calls are now for “diversity,” that is obtaining slots for a select few of the oppressed in elite institutions. Instead of fighting for *equality*, we hear sugary phrases about “equity” (meaning what, exactly?). And while there is a lot of talk about “white privilege,” proponents of CRT (the real thing, not the Trumpists’ caricature) have ditched the fight for black liberation that uproots the *special oppression* of African Americans, because they seek some class privilege for themselves and their clientele.

Along with references to *institutional* racism and *structural* racism, it has now become widely accepted that there is *systemic racism* in the U.S. *But what is that system?* As Marxists, we answer that the fact that every advance for black rights has met with a backlash that protracts the oppression of African Americans is not due to irremediable racism of white people in general, but to the racist *capitalist* system which produces and endlessly reproduces black oppression. The answer is to fight for *revolutionary integrationism* through militant *class struggle* against racist reaction. It means a fight for *black liberation through so-*

<sup>4</sup> Pioneering U.S. Trotskyist Richard S. Fraser made a similar point in his “The Negro Struggle and the Proletarian Revolution” (1953); see section on “The Origin of the Race Concept.”

<sup>5</sup> See Charles Brover, “Revolutionary Integrationism vs. ‘Critical Race Theory’” on page 20 of this issue of *Marxism & Education*.

*cialist revolution*, which is the last thing that the thoroughly bourgeois liberal pundits of the *1619 Project*<sup>6</sup> and academic CRT theorists would want.

For educators, the task is not to choose between one false “narrative” or another, liberal vs. conservative, but to *fight these witch-hunting gag laws and the bipartisan racist onslaught against public education head-on*. We need to mobilize in the streets and against the capitalist courts and politicians who would regiment students and teachers. Rather than guilt-tripping white teachers, students, parents and workers with “privilege walks” to ferret out “implicit bias” purportedly shared by all, we must deal with the material basis that generates racist ideology. That includes fighting to end racial segregation, tracking and “screening” for elite schools by *uniting teachers, students, parents and workers* in a *union-led fight for quality, integrated public education for all*. That, of course, will be opposed by many liberals, which will make it clear to all, in struggle, who the racists are.

There should be no illusions. Witch hunts in the schools are nothing new. Public education is hardly a zone of “institutional neutrality.” Under capitalism, schools have a class character: public or private, they are *capitalist* institutions, the primary centers of reproducing bourgeois values, principles, and ideologies. As Marx wrote (in *The German Ideology* [1847]) “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.” That is why state education boards go over textbooks with a fine-toothed comb. Any serious effort to teach the real history of racist American capitalism will be met with massive opposition from the rulers, and possibly outlawed. Today, the conservatives are trying to do just that with their caricature of “critical race theory.” Yesterday, liberals and conservatives joined hands to purge anyone they deemed communist. The McCarthyite purges of the 1940s and ‘50s were largely successful, but U.S. society has changed and the current racist witch-hunters *can be defeated*.

To combat this onslaught requires a leadership with a program and the determination to fight. The teachers unions, and most “social justice” caucuses in them, lack both. Class Struggle Education Workers is an organization of Marxist educators, working fraternally with the Internationalist Group, that seeks to revolutionize education – and all of society. We fight to provide education that truly serves working people and the emancipation of humanity, still stuck in the Dark Ages of enforced ignorance. We say plainly that such an education is not possible under capitalism, which condemns hundreds of thousands to die of a modern plague, and millions to grinding poverty; where many of our students are homeless; where women and girls are prevented from learning by reactionary thugs who got their start as “holy warriors” for the “free world”; where black youth are executed on the streets by racist police.

Class-conscious educators must be part of the front ranks of the struggle for the liberation of all the oppressed. Is this your fight, too? If so, join us. We’ve got a big job ahead. ■

<sup>6</sup> See “The 1619 Project: Misidentifying the Roots of Racism,” on page 16 of this issue of *Marxism & Education*.

# The 1776 Report: Whitewashing U.S. History

The racist attacks on public education are not only a virulent response to the electoral defeat of Trump. They are above all part of the racist reaction to the summer 2020 mass mobilizations that brought some 26 million people to the streets, day after day, night after night, to denounce the wanton police murder of George Floyd and call for the end of *systemic racism*. At the height of the protests, Trump delivered a Fourth of July speech at Mount Rushmore against “far-left fascism” and the “left-wing cultural revolution” he claims is trying to “end America” and “our beloved American way of life.” In this tirade of reactionary rhetoric, about how “we settled the Wild West” (genocide of Native Americans) and “pursued our Manifest Destiny across the ocean” (colonizing Philippines, Cuba and Puerto Rico), the racist-in-chief called to resist “bad, evil people.” He summed up:

“The violent mayhem we have seen in the streets of cities that are run by liberal Democrats, in every case, is the predictable result of years of extreme indoctrination and bias in education, journalism, and other cultural institutions.... Our children are taught in school to hate their own country, and to believe that the men and women who built it were not heroes, but that [they] were villains.”

In September, Trump went further, first with a memo banning “un-American propaganda training sessions” and “any training on ‘critical race theory’” suggesting “that the United States is an inherently racist or evil country”! Then in a 17 September 2020 speech in a White House Conference on American History, he again denounced “decades of left-wing indoctrination in our schools” and vituperated against “CRT,” saying this “Marxist doctrine” holds that “America is a wicked and racist nation.” To combat this scourge he announced an executive order (13958) forming the “1776 Commission” to “promote patriotic education.” Beyond the blatant electoral appeal to “white grievance,” this was a call to enforce “national unity” through patriotic indoctrination in the schools.

In the end, Trump’s scheme for the *Gleichschaltung* (forcing into line) of American schools (as Hitler’s regimentation of German educational and cultural institutions was called) did not come to fruition, due to his electoral defeat. But on his last day in office, 19 January 2021, the White House issued the “Fi-



Bloomberg

**Racist-in-chief Donald Trump displays executive order creating 1776 Commission, calling for “patriotic education.”**

nal Report of the President’s Advisory Commission on 1776.” *The 1776 Report* was on the White House website for exactly one day, but it became the official textbook for the Trumpers’ anti-“CRT” onslaught. It quotes Alexander Hamilton on the need for “the energy of a common national sentiment; on a uniformity of principles and habits.” It sought to enforce that uniformity in the schools, proclaiming: “Patriotic education must have at its center a respect for the rule of law....”

Intended as the antidote to *1619 Project* of the *New York Times* (more on that on page 9), it seeks to erase the legacy of slavery from U.S. history. Indeed, it justified the U.S. Constitution’s provisions implicitly upholding slavery, saying “no durable union could have been formed without a compromise among the states on the issue of slavery.” Of the Civil War it says only that Americans were divided “between the Confederate and Union forces,” while the “conflict was resolved, but at a cost of more than 600,000 lives.” Instead, it blithely says “Constitutional amendments were passed to abolish slavery, grant equal protection under the law, and guarantee the right to vote regardless of race.” So the momentous “Second American Revolution,” which freed the slaves by force of arms (crucially those wielded by the nearly 200,000 African Americans who enrolled in the





**Trump supporters storm U.S. Capitol, 6 January 2021, brandishing the Confederate battle flag of the slavocracy.**

Union forces), is reduced to legislative action, impossible without Union victory in the war.

Meanwhile, the *1776 Report*'s injunctions against "mob rule" are pretty rich *coming from the crowd that only a couple of weeks earlier stormed the U.S. Capitol with the Confederate battle flag flying*. It calls on states and school districts to reject any curriculum that promotes "activist propaganda, or factional ideologies that demean America's heritage." Instead: "Americans yearn for timeless stories and noble heroes that inspire them to be good, brave, diligent, daring," etc., etc. In other words, comic books fit for a Trump. Among ideologies that are deemed "challenges to America's principles" it lists slavery, fascism and communism, but adds "progressivism" and "racism and identity politics." "Progressivism" is rejected for advocating "evolving rights," while "color blind civil rights" are counterposed to affirmative action efforts to "overcome long-accrued inequalities."

The *1776 Report* is indeed an often comically simplistic attempt to codify a right-wing "official story" of U.S. history,



**Engraving in *Harper's Weekly* depicting the 55th Massachusetts Colored Regiment marching through Charleston, South Carolina, 21 February 1865. The *1776 Report* and the *1619 Project* both pass over the significance of the Civil War in ending slavery.**

but it is not therefore harmless. Including a lengthy disquisition tracing the "intellectual origins of identity politics" to "the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, [who] argued that the focus should not be on economic revolution as much as taking control of the institutions that shape culture," it was written by a coterie of minor-league right-wing academics, lawyers and think-tank hacks. While the Trumpers' anti-"CRT" crusade aims at censoring any discussion of the roots of racism in the social, economic and political system of the United States, the Report was a blueprint for the kind of supposedly "color-blind" racist indoctrination they would like to impose, while racist police bash in the heads of anti-racist demonstrators. ■

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# The 1619 Project: Misidentifying the Roots of Racism

Donald Trump's *1776 Report* singles out the *1619 Project*, launched in the *New York Times Magazine* (18 August 2019), as the prime example of "Critical Race Theory." The Florida state regulations and a bill introduced in Congress in July, sponsored by Arkansas senator Tom Cotton, specifically ban using the project in schools. (There are lesson plans and other instructional materials for it from the Pulitzer Center.) Trump complained that students used to be taught, "1492, Columbus discovered America.... Now they want to make it the 1619 Project." What sets Trumpers off is the Project's focus on how the United States was built on chattel slavery, starting with the arrival of the first boatload of African slaves in Virginia in August 1619. Yet that along with the pro-slavery provisions of the Constitution and the domination of early U.S. politics by slaveholders are *incontrovertible facts*.

The *1619 Project* highlights not only the centrality of slavery to the rise of the United States as an economic power, but also how that heritage continued after slavery's abolition. This was embodied not only in formal Jim Crow segregation – which was only ended a century after the Civil War – but in everything from the death penalty and the unending racist brutality of the police to the "redlining" of housing to exclude African Americans and others, as well as de facto school segregation, sports, music and every other aspect of U.S. society. To even discuss this enrages the racists, who want to limit racism to overt discrimination.

But the *1619 Project* goes far beyond such realities that the rightists want to erase, and into the kind of mystification that stands in the way of actually clarifying the roots of racism, as part of the fight to uproot it. The *Project's* inspirer, former *New York Times* journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, writes in the introductory essay that "one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery." On the 1619 Project's claim that independence from Britain was "in order to ensure that slavery would continue," five of the leading historians of slavery and racism in U.S. history declared



New York Times

**Nikole Hannah-Jones at celebration of the 1619 Project at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, October 2019.**

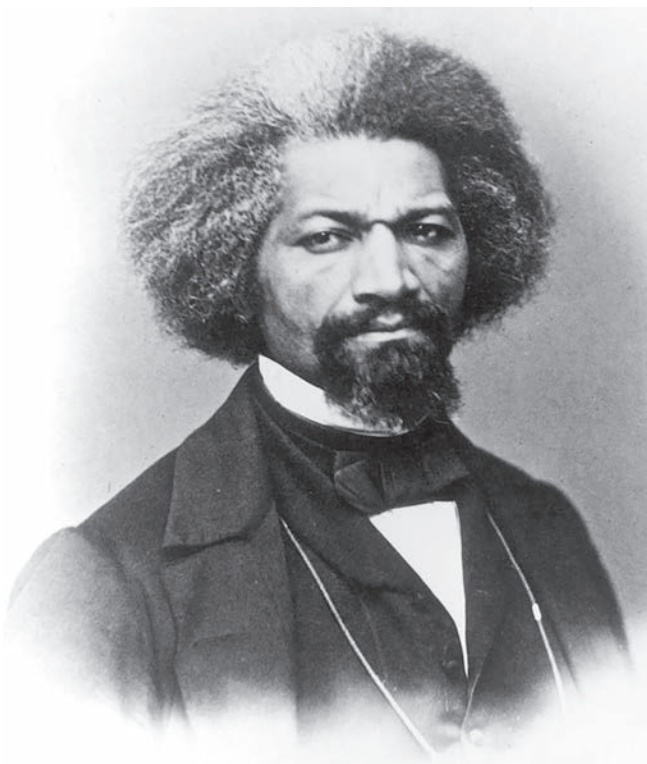
flatly: "This is not true."<sup>1</sup>

Yes, George Washington and Patrick Henry were indignant at Britain's limitation of their ability to speculate in lands to the west of the 1763 boundary established after the "French and Indian War," and slaveowners were enraged when British officials armed some slaves to fight for the Crown. But the most basic cause of independence was the emergence of a distinct American ruling class (of which Northern merchants were a key part) whose interests were incompatible with continued colonial subjection.

The American Revolution was a limited political revolution that left slavery intact. Moreover, by not mentioning slavery either in the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, the "Founding Fathers" (many of them slaveholders) sought to evade the glaring contradiction between that system of human bondage and the soaring rhetoric that "all men are created equal" with "inalienable rights" including to freedom. U.S. race ideology developed in large part to explain and "justify" the clash between these ideals of universal natural rights and the exclusion from them of a whole, specially oppressed and subjugated group of people whose labor was nonetheless essential for the social system's operation.

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Victoria Bynum, James M. McPherson, James Oakes, Sean Wilentz and Gordon S. Wood, "Re: The 1619 Project," *New York Times Magazine*, 9 December 2019.





**The great fighter for black freedom, Frederick Douglass, is hardly mentioned in the *1619 Project*.**

Hannah-Jones writes that the U.S. Constitution “preserved and protected slavery without ever using the word,” which it did, particularly in safeguarding the political power of the Southern planter class.<sup>2</sup> But she ignores the fact that it also provided for the end to the slave trade – to be sure, after a delay – and enabled abolition in the North. In fact, the Revolution led to the abolition of slavery in all Northern states by 1827 (starting with Vermont in 1777 and Pennsylvania in 1780) and to the clash between North and South becoming, despite each successive “Compromise,” an “irrepressible conflict” culminating in the Civil War.

In some striking ways, Hannah-Jones’ portrayal of the Constitution parallels that of John C. Calhoun, the leading ideologist of the slave South, who tried to claim it as a positive defense of slavery, thus making abolition unconstitutional. In 1854, William Lloyd Garrison famously burned the Constitution, and two years later fellow abolitionist Wendell Phillips wrote a polemic titled *The Constitution A Pro-Slavery Compact*. But the great abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass fought to abolish slavery in part on the basis of the Constitution. All this expressed not only differences on strategy and tactics but also the *contradictions* lodged in the origins of the U.S. itself, which blew up in the Civil War. Yet significantly, the key role of the abolitionists, black and white, in the struggle to overthrow slavery is largely ignored in the *1619 Project*.

This reflects the fact that overall, the *Project* treats “white America” as one undifferentiated entity. Thus the introductory

<sup>2</sup> See “Slavery and the Constitution: Origins of U.S. Capitalist Democracy,” *Revolution* No. 17, August 2020.

essay explains the bloody racist riots against black workers after World War I as a “symptom of the psychological mechanism necessary to absolve white Americans of their country’s original sin,” saying that “white Americans resorted to the same racist ideology that Jefferson and the framers had used at the nation’s founding.” In this ahistorical account, all “white Americans” were made responsible for these pogroms – nothing about how patriotic mobs of off-duty sailors and recently discharged Army vets attacked black neighborhoods, about how strikebreaking bosses fueled race-hate to set white workers against black, or how the government’s xenophobic “red scare” fed racist attacks.<sup>3</sup>

On the 1960s civil rights struggles, Hannah-Jones wrote: “For the most part, black Americans fought back alone.” Hundreds of thousands of black people mobilized for equal rights, but they were not alone. What strides have been made in winning black rights in the U.S. have almost always been the result of *integrated* struggle. This includes advances that came as part of militant mass workers’ unionization drives in the 1930s and ’40s. In fact, a range of notable figures – Montgomery’s Rosa Parks and E.D. Nixon, Ella Baker, Paule Marshall, Lorraine Hansberry, to name just a few – shared roots in radical left and union struggles. This goes unmentioned in the *1619 Project*, which reflects a very different, bourgeois liberal, middle- or upper-class outlook, which accounts for some of its glaring blind spots.

It is notable how the prime example of integrated struggle for black rights, the Civil War – in which hundreds of thousands of white and black soldiers died in the struggle that abolished slavery – gets such short shrift in the *1619 Project*. The introduction focuses on Lincoln’s August 1862 talk with black leaders about sending black people to another country. But there is no mention there of the already finalized *Emancipation Proclamation* which he had in his pocket and promulgated the next month.<sup>4</sup> It refers to the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments which abolished slavery, provided citizenship for all born here and the right to vote for black men, noting that newly freed black people fought for them. But it does not credit any of the (white) Radical Republicans who pushed the amendments through Congress and state legislatures.

**1776 Report and 1619 Project  
Pass Over the Civil War**

It is striking how *both Trump’s 1776 Report and the 1619 Project pass over the Civil War*. The latter’s authors, while seeking to be anti-racists, nonetheless fail to see that *the fight over slavery was at the heart of the Civil War* and that *from the outset, its abolition was key to victory for the Union against the Confederate slave masters*. Frederick Douglass understood this immediately, writing in May 1861:

“The American people and the Government in Washington may refuse to recognize it for a time, but the ‘inexorable

<sup>3</sup> See William Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (University of Illinois Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> See “The Emancipation Proclamation: Promise and Betrayal,” and “Lincoln, Lincoln, and the Abolition of Slavery” in *The Internationalist* No. 34, March-April 2013.

logic of events' will force it upon them in the end: that the war now being waged in this land is a war for and against slavery; and that it can never be effectively put down till one or the other of these vital forces is completely destroyed."<sup>5</sup>

The founder of modern communism, Karl Marx, said the same in November 1861:

"The present struggle between the South and North is, therefore, nothing but a struggle between two social systems, the system of slavery and the system of free labour. The struggle has broken out because the two systems can no longer live peacefully side by side on the North American continent. It can only be ended by the victory of one system or the other."<sup>6</sup>

And that is what happened. The *1776 Report* seeks to whitewash U.S. history while the *1619 Project* is an idealist indictment of the "sin" and "betrayal" of "democratic ideals" by "white Americans." Only Marxism provides a materialist analysis of the roots of racism in the capitalist system, and a revolutionary program to uproot it.

The brutal, bloody oppression of black people – from chattel slavery, lynching and Jim Crow segregation to mass incarceration and racist police murder today – is the key defining feature of American capitalism. But it is not unique. The introduction to the *1619 Project* asks:

"What if, however, we were to tell you that this fact, which is taught in our schools and unanimously celebrated every Fourth of July, is wrong, and that the country's true birth date, the moment that its defining contradictions first came into the world, was in late August of 1619?... [T]hat was when a ship arrived at Point Comfort in the British colony of Virginia, bearing a cargo of 20 to 30 enslaved Africans."

Revolutionary Marxists do not celebrate the Fourth of July, for the reasons Frederick Douglass laid out in one of his famous speeches.<sup>7</sup> But let us pose another question: if we are

<sup>5</sup> Douglass' *Monthly*, cited in James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War* (1965), quoted in our article, "What 'Post-Racial' America? Barack Obama vs. Black Liberation," *The Internationalist* No. 28, March-April 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, "The Civil War in the United States," reproduced in Internationalist Class Readings, *Marx on Slavery and the U.S. Civil War*.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" (1852)



**"A Negro Regiment in Action." Slavery was the central issue of the Civil War from the beginning and its abolition was key to victory for the Union forces. Engraving by Thomas Nast, appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, 14 March 1863.**

offering birth dates for the U.S., how about nine years earlier, in August of 1610? That was the date of the first massacre of Native Americans, when the governor of the Virginia colony, Lord De la Warr (after whom the state of Delaware is named), sent a squad to wipe out the village of the Paspahegh Indians, killing dozens. Even before the introduction of chattel slavery, the United States was founded on *genocide of the indigenous peoples*. But it's actually not about birth dates, it's about a system which not only began with but keeps reproducing such horrors over and over. That system is capitalism.

Hannah-Jones writes: "Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country." Ten years earlier, the Internationalist Group wrote something similar, but very different in content and programmatic consequence. In an article on "Barack Obama vs. Black Liberation" (*The Internationalist* No. 28, March-April 2009), we noted how the ruling class used the inauguration of the first African American president of the United States "to claim that this proves that racism in the United States has been overcome. Don't believe it. It goes far deeper than legal discrimination – *racial oppression is inscribed in the DNA of American capitalism*" (emphasis in original). Not the United States as a country, not white Americans in general, but *American capitalism*. And we added: "It will take a revolution to do away with this scourge."

### No Program for Struggle

The *1619 Project* has no program for struggle. It states that "the root of the endemic racism that we still cannot purge from this nation to this day" lies in the "belief, that black people were not merely enslaved but were a slave race." Yet the mate-



## White Man (1936)

*The radical African-American writer Langston Hughes wrote the following poem in 1936, at the time of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.*

Sure I know you!  
 You're a White Man.  
 I'm a Negro.  
 You take all the best jobs  
 And leave us the garbage cans to empty and  
 The halls to clean.  
 You have a good time in a big house at Palm Beach  
 And rent us the back alleys  
 And the dirty slums.  
 You enjoy Rome  
 And take Ethiopia.  
 White Man! White Man!  
 Let Louis Armstrong play it  
 And you copyright it  
 And make the money.  
 You're the smart guy, White Man!  
 You got everything!  
 But now,  
 I hear your name ain't really White Man.  
 I hear it's something  
 Marx wrote down  
 Fifty years ago  
 That rich people don't like to read.  
 Is that true, White Man?  
 Is your name in a book  
 Called the Communist Manifesto?  
 Is your name spelled  
 C-A-P-I-T-A-L-I-S-T?  
 Are you always a White Man?  
 Huh?

rial reality of enslavement, for profit, made that belief, not the other way around. The Project traces this back to the infamous 1857 Dred Scott decision of the segregationist Supreme Court, that the "Negro race" was not part of "the people" and had "no rights that a white man was bound to respect." Yes, that was a key codification of slavery's racist doctrine. That grotesque white supremacist ruling was *overruled by the Civil War*, whose verdict was codified in the subsequent amendments to the Constitution.

Reconstruction pushed toward fulfilling their promise. Its most radical proponents sought to break up the lands and power that Southern rulers had amassed through slavery, and to carry out "40 acres and a mule" even after Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, effectively nullified General Sherman's famous order by returning lands to plantation owners. Thousands of black Civil War veterans bore arms and organized in defense of this cause. But the Northern

bourgeoisie betrayed the promise of Reconstruction in 1877. Soon came Jim Crow ... and then mass struggles to end it. To essentially pretend that nothing has happened since 1619, or 1857, or that white Americans all share this racist ideology today when millions joined marches against racist terror last summer, is to write off the struggle for black equality in the United States – which is exactly what the proponents of Critical Race Theory do.

Some who have criticized the *1619 Project* have falsely described its program as "black nationalist." This includes the "World Socialist Web Site" (which should be known as the *World Scab Web Site* for its anti-labor politics, including telling black Amazon workers in Alabama to vote against a union). But the *Project* authors don't mention any nationalist figures or movements, such as Marcus Garvey or even the Black Panthers. They do not seek separation as doctrinal nationalists would, nor are they radical in any way. In fact, they say "black Americans have made astounding progress" and "became the most American of all." By this they mean advancement for a narrow layer of middle-class professionals, including themselves. In reality, they are Obama Democrats disappointed that his promised "post-racial America" hasn't arrived, while past gains and even basic voting rights are flagrantly being rolled back by Trump Republicans. In contrast, we wrote at the outset of Obama's presidency:

"For the African American Obama to take office in the highest elected position in this country reflected a considerable social change in this country founded on chattel slavery, where Jim Crow segregation continued into the 1960s – and where in the 21st century blacks and Latinos have still been prevented from voting. But this has not changed the system of imperialist capitalism one iota: with Obama at the helm, the U.S. is bombing Iraq and Afghanistan to hell, marauding in Pakistan, supplying the weaponry for Israeli slaughter in Gaza, throwing millions out of work in the U.S. while enslaving workers with starvation wages around the planet."

–"Obama Presidency: U.S. Imperialism Tries a Make-over," *The Internationalist* No. 28, March-April 2009.

The union-bashing WSWS complains that the *1619 Project* passes over Martin Luther King, because "King's political outlook was opposed to the racist narrative advanced by the *Times*." These pseudo-socialists – who dismiss any struggle against the oppression of black people, women or for gay, lesbian and transgender rights as identity politics and who deny that racist police target young black men in their endless killing spree – in fact share the political outlook of liberalism, including defense of key aspects of patriotic Americanism. Critical Race Theory originated in disenchantment with and despair over the *failure* of the civil rights movement to desegregate public schools, ascribing this to all-embracing and undefeatable white racism. Instead, the blame lies squarely with the white racist capitalist ruling class, and the politicians that serve it, Republican and Democrat, notably Joe Biden who led Northern liberals opposed to school integration by busing (and who this crowd voted for in 2020). ■

# Revolutionary Integrationism vs. “Critical Race Theory”



Bettman Archives

**March for school integration in New York City, 1964. Today NYC schools are among the most segregated in the United States. Faced with the failure of the liberal integration program, and the rollback of gains of the civil rights movement generally, the founders of Critical Race Theory gave up on the struggle against segregation. Marxists fight instead for the program of revolutionary integrationism, for black liberation through socialist revolution.**

*Marxism & Education is publishing a slightly edited talk given to our New York City teachers study group in November 2019 by Charles Brover. It should be noted the talk was delivered before the caricature of CRT became the target of right-wing racists. For the last several years, the NYC Department of Education along with school administrations around the country has been aggressively pushing a bureaucratic shaming program that tries to get teachers to admit to implicit or “unconscious” racial bias. The theoretical underpinning of this crusade is “Critical Race Theory,” which explains racial oppression (and global history generally) as being the result of a system of white supremacy and “white skin privilege.” This doctrine diverts attention from struggle against the embedded structural racism that is endemic to capitalist society, and as shown below actually supports segregation. CRT is a program of defeat for black people. Marxists fight instead for the program of revolutionary integrationism through socialist revolution.*

**By Charles Brover**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has taken over like Kudzu in the groves of academe, and is now spreading to school systems around the country and the world. Along with feminism, CRT

dominates what passes for theory in the liberal social sciences, particularly in the field of education. Although university-based it reflects and influences larger intellectual styles and moods.

This afternoon, I will try to briefly situate the origins of CRT historically and politically, then critically examine some of the main themes of the foundational document of CRT by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate, and then sketch out the outlines of a Marxist historical materialist response. While posing our class-based opposition to CRT, I want to consider what may be valuable for our anti-racist politics. And then let’s open a discussion of the ways in which CRT and its ideological framework of “white supremacy” affects your work as educators and activists. We have a report from a supporter of Class Struggle Education Workers that gets us off to an excellent start (see page 35).

I am going to come at this from a somewhat roundabout direction. I will necessarily compress this presentation at the expense of depth and detail, but we can circle back to questions in the discussion period.

**In the Beginning...**

On origins: Critical Race Theory develops as a conflation of two influential and profoundly defeatist intellectual trends. First, the so-called linguistic turn in the study of humanities;



and second, in the U.S., a woefully pessimistic response to the failure of the liberal civil rights movement to deliver on promises of racial equality – particularly in education.

Let's begin with a cursory review of a trend in intellectual history, situating CRT as part of the late 20th-century linguistic turn, what Bryan Palmer has called the *Descent into Discourse* (1990) in his brilliant book of that name. (By the way, he has also written the best book on the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters' strike.) I rely on Palmer's analysis for much of what I will say about discourse theory. He begins his book with a quote from Trotsky's 1924 polemic against the Russian formalists in *Literature and Revolution*:

"The formalists show a fast-ripening religiousness. They are followers of St. John. They believe that 'In the beginning was the Word.' But we believe that in the beginning was the deed."

That is how Palmer inscribes his critique of discourse theory by declaring bluntly that language is not life. For post-modernist discourse theory, language is understood not only as the medium of culture, but is reified – taken as concrete reality – beyond economic, social and political relations. They use the word "discourse" to signify a more fashionable academic sophistication. Discourse theory and post-structuralism/post-modernism, with its granting of a privileged status to language, fails to offer the interpretive clarity and revolutionary guidance of the historical materialist tradition rooted in the production/reproduction of social life.

Palmer traces the academic triumph of discourse theory from its idealist philosophical underpinnings in Nietzschean "aestheticism" and anti-rationalism through the discovery of formal linguistics with Ferdinand de Saussure, who said that language systems are governed by structures. In this "discourse," words are signs composed of signifiers that may bear no relation to the denoted and signified connected to thought. As the signifiers floated free of their referents and material moorings, more inclusive interpretive methods became possible. Claude Levi-Strauss applied the idea of language structures to all human systems of communication, and the reification of language was more or less complete.

The *post*-structural moment was defined by pessimism and political retreat. It was centered mainly in France, where the events of May 1968 convinced student protestors that they could not contend for state power with the workers in the grip of a reformist Communist Party. Unable to break the structures of the state, many students backed off the streets, retreated into the classrooms and set out to break the structures of language. A number decided that most systematic thought was Stalinized and sought refuge away from what they called "totalizing narratives," Marxism and Leninism chief among them. Academic research turned from such suspect "grand narratives" to the exegesis of particularities of custom and language.

By the 1970s and '80s this fixation on the non-referential character and autonomy of language would produce a full-scale retreat from the living movement and a theoretical implosion with a variety of contending discourse theories. From Michel Foucault's discourses on power (in *Archaeology of Knowledge*



Internationalist photo

**Class Struggle Education Workers and Internationalists continue to fight for integrated high-quality schools. Outside elite Stuyvesant High School in NYC, May 2021.**

[1969] he couldn't have been clearer: "There can be no question of interpreting discourse with a view to writing a history of the referent") to the psychoanalytic focus of Jacques Lacan, to philosopher Jacques Derrida's deconstruction that raised language to new peaks of instability. The text became the medium *and* the message. "There is nothing outside the text," Derrida famously announced.

Palmer observes that there were however important critical voices raised against this defeatist descent into discourse, notably Edward Said, whose groundbreaking political critique and study of racist Orientalism in language and culture was grounded in the material world. He connected the academic popularity of discourse theory in the U.S. to a general political retreat in the 1980s:

"It is no accident that the emergence of so narrowly defined a philosophy of pure textuality ... has coincided with the ascendancy of Reaganism ... a new cold war, increased militarism ... and a massive turn to the right."

Nevertheless, discourse theory conquered the ivory towers with its murky conceptions of sliding and unknowable meaning, faith in the autonomous determinative power of language, and the dismissal of Marxism – along with material social and economic life overall.

### Separate is Not Equal

So now we come to the other defeatist trend that propelled Critical Race Theory to academic dominance. CRT does not originate in a theoretical vacuum. It was into this well-established

lished academic language soup and word salad of discourse theory that CRT came to dine in the 1990s. If discourse theory represented the crossroads of political retreat and theoretical implosion, CRT mapped out its own defeatist path on matters of race. As the Ladson-Billings and Tate article<sup>1</sup> makes clear, Derrick Bell is the intellectual progenitor and godfather of CRT. Bell (who died in 2011) was the first African American tenured law professor at Harvard and an important and innovative legal scholar. In Michelle Alexander's introduction to the 2018 republication of his *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992), she notes the "contributions he made to the field of Critical Race Theory, a body of legal scholarship that revolutionized what was spoken, taught, and debated in classrooms nationwide."

The trajectory of Bell's career is important for understanding CRT. He began as a civil rights attorney trying cases for the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund. But in the 1970s he had an epiphany: gains could be wiped out and reversed. Looking squarely at the re-segregation of schools (particularly after the 2003 Orfield/Harvard study),<sup>2</sup> he decided that the historic *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954 was a mistake, "as far as the law is concerned, truly dead and beyond resuscitation." He reconsidered his work as a leading civil rights lawyer, and he assessed the lessons he learned:

"At that time, I believed that my work on school desegregation might prove to be the high point of my career. I was wrong. The implementation of the court orders that I helped obtain resulted in the closing of black schools and the dismissal of thousands of black teachers and administrators. ... [B]lack children faced hostility.... Desegregated schools adopted tracking mechanisms that placed most blacks on non-academic tracks...."<sup>3</sup>

In his recognition of the failure of school desegregation Bell concludes this period of his career by shockingly opting for the 1896 "separate but equal doctrine" of the Jim Crow *Plessy vs. Ferguson* ruling:

"I have suggested, a Brown decision that mandated the full enforcement of the equal portion of the separate-but-equal doctrine rather than one striking that doctrine down, might have better advanced the education of black as well as white children.... [I]t would have led to a better outcome in the long run."

We Marxists learned very different lessons from the same historical circumstances. We saw the failure of the Civil Rights Movement to fulfill its promises as the inevitable failure of a movement constrained by liberalism and trapped within the capitalist parameters of the Democratic Party. We posed instead a program of *revolutionary* integrationism looking to the power of the multiracial workers movement, and with a revolutionary multiracial workers party acting as a tribune of the people.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate IV, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education" (1995).

<sup>2</sup> Erica Frankenberg, Chungmei Lee and Gary Orfield, "A Multiracial Society with Segregated Schools: Are We Losing the Dream?" (The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University, January 2003). The project is now located at the University of California at Los Angeles.

<sup>3</sup> Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*.

<sup>4</sup> See Richard S. Fraser, "For the Materialist Conception of the Negro Struggle" (1955)



**Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw, originators of Critical Race Theory.**

We struggle for school integration as a democratic right, with the understanding that in the U.S. separate can never be equal. Bell in contrast saw the hopelessness of racial integration itself.

For Bell and later law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, and for CRT generally, their essential conviction is that racism in the U.S. is permanent and perpetually dominant. Therefore, in Bell's second act on the legal front, he proposed his theory of "interest convergence." That is, black people could only make temporary gains when it converged with the interests of white people. He saw *Brown* as:

"the definitive example that the interest of blacks in achieving racial justice is accommodated only when and for so long as policymakers find that the interest of blacks converges with the political and economic interests of whites."

When he described interest convergence with regard to *Brown* it sounds somewhat like our own analysis of the political considerations on the minds of the rulers who accommodated partial gains of the civil rights legislation:

"[The] *Brown* decision advanced U.S. interests because racial segregation was hampering the United States in the Cold War with communist nations and undermining U.S. efforts to combat subversion at home...."

—"Free Market Racism: Segregated Schools, Gentrified Neighborhoods," *Marxism and Education* No. 5, Summer 2018

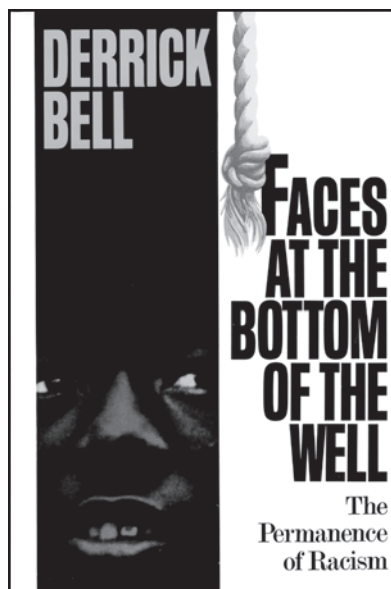
But whereas Bell ascribed the benefits to white people generally, we understood that the beneficiaries of the liberal Civil Rights legislation were foremost the capitalist state and its imperialist interests and only secondarily black people in desegregating many areas of public accommodations.

In his last phase Bell takes his political pessimism to its logical conclusion that he calls, "racial realism":

"Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary 'peaks of progress,' short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance."

Bell's most influential text of this period is *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, a rich stew of stories, essays, pseudo-myths and Socratic dialogues that insist on the proposition that white Americans will always be racist, will always sacrifice potential black progress for their perceived advantage. With a nod to





**Derrick Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* was influential in founding Critical Race Theory.**

them into outer space for an ominously unspecified purpose. The proposition, greeted at first with shock and dismay, is debated and the racist deal is finally struck.

The central point here is that Bell's political pessimism is warranted and logical if one believes, as he does, that capitalism is the end of history. Indeed, it is not farfetched to assert that racism is a permanent feature of U.S. capitalism. As we have said, metaphorically speaking, racism is in the DNA of the capitalist system, but not literally and biologically that racism is in the DNA of white people.

### Telling Stories

So when we come to the Ladson-Billings/Tate foundational article, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education," it is not surprising that its introductory quote is from Derrick Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*. The authors find the sources of CRT in the critical legal studies of Bell and Crenshaw that critique the liberal, legally based strategy for black equality. But while many of their criticisms of liberalism and their observations of pervasive racism in the schools are valid and often insightful, CRT does not advance the theoretical possibilities for black liberation and does much to obscure what is required to effectively fight racism. Indeed, they see racism as eternal and inevitable.

The first proposition of the Ladson-Billings/Tate article states that race "continues to be a significant factor in determining inequality in the United States" and has impact in people's daily lives – certainly undeniable from a Marxist perspective. The authors acknowledge that Marxist formulations based in class and also gender-based analyses contribute to an understanding of inequality, but that these approaches fail to adequately address race. Arguing that such theories "naturalize whiteness," they declare their mission is to theorize race – while being vague about what constitutes theory.

The argument that racism has deprived black Americans

science fiction, the last chapter, "Space Traders," is the most well-known chunk of the book and continues to be assigned in classes all over the country. The premise and plot of the story goes like this: Aliens arrive in the U.S. and offer a deal. They propose to fix all of the pressing problems of the country with enough gold to end the national debt, as well as creating permanent cheap energy resources, and so on. What they want in return is to take all the black people with

of the education they need and deserve is not new. The primacy of the educational color line was powerfully drawn by Carter Woodson in the *Miseducation of the Negro* (1933) and advanced by W.E.B. Du Bois. What was new in CRT was its insistence on language analysis and its emphasis on counter-narratives. When the authors look back at Woodson and Du Bois, they correctly assess the ways that racist education harms black children, but in doing so they shift from the idea that race is a *significant factor* to race as the "central construct" of inequality. And following a descent into discourse, they contend that this central construction is based in language.

This is the idealism at the heart of CRT, seen most clearly in its insistence on "voice" and counter-story as the central strategy of social survival and political transformation. What do they mean when they ask children to "name their own reality?" Notice this sharp descent into discourse: "For the critical race theorist social reality is constructed by the formulation and exchange of stories about individual situations." Of course, social reality is constructed, but not simply just as we please by telling alternative stories. Culture is mediated by language, but in the last analysis social relations reflect the historical material conditions of economic and social life. However, if one believes that the social world is linguistically constructed by narratives and non-referential language, then counter-narratives must necessarily constitute the strategic oppositional practice.

Of course, we want all children and particularly the children of oppressed groups to be positively recognized in school as they tell their stories in their own way. (Sociolinguist James Gee studies how black kids tell stories differently.) And we want the education system and the curriculum to appreciate the validity of their experience and cultural interests. Telling stories can be a powerful antidote to internalized oppression. But we don't want to dissolve material reality and the concrete struggles for educational equality in a sea of subjectivity.

One of the authors' main ideas is that "U.S. society is based on property rights." This rights talk is a cornerstone of the liberal legal framework. Private property rights developed with the state and are inherent in capitalism. The authors explain that they seek to "disentangle" democracy from capitalism, and they criticize traditional civil rights approaches that argue for democracy while "ignoring the structural inequality of capitalism." They acknowledge that U.S. democracy was "built on capitalism." And they explain that enslaved people were treated as property. So far, we agree. But just when logic would seem to require that they then call for a revolution to end capitalism as a condition of black equality and liberation, they dance away into a quasi-nationalist crouch about the benefits conferred on the owners of the property of 'whiteness,' never indicting the owners of the means of production as a class.

They expand this idea of property rights to explain inequalities in schooling as a difference in "intellectual property." By the end of the article the authors have gone off the rails following the work of Cheryl Harris that argues that whiteness is property. Note this remarkable sentence: "But more pernicious and long lasting than the victimization of people of color is the construction of whiteness as the ultimate property." They

go on to claim that whites alone possess this valuable property and its privileged cultural practices. Therefore, black children are punished in school for not possessing it and failing to absorb “white norms.” They proclaim that “Legally whites can use and enjoy the privileges of whiteness.” This leads to the theme of “white privilege” that we will look at in more depth later.

At bottom, CRT is a species of black sectoralism. Ladson-Billings and Tate display their black nationalist core beliefs when they proclaim that as critical race theorists:

“We align our scholarship and activism with the philosophy of Marcus Garvey who believed that the black man was universally oppressed on racial grounds, and that any program of emancipation would have to be built around the question of race first.”

As is widely known, Marcus Garvey’s Afro-pessimism, relentless separatist ideology, and back-to-Africa movement led him into alignment with the Ku Klux Klan.

CRT’s adherence to “race first” is more than a claim for interpretive priority. It is also meant to signal a sequence of social transformation. For CRT the question of black equality must be solved *before* revolutionary transformation, and that implies accommodation with capitalism.

### White Supremacy: A Question of Power

But it is not just that Marxism represents the only program for revolutionary class struggle to topple the capitalist state. It also embodies a theory and analytical tools radically superior to CRT for *understanding* racism. Marxism is able to explain the historical and contemporaneous interactions between race and capitalism – that is, Marxism is superior to CRT on the very intellectual terrain they claim. Take the cornerstone concepts of CRT: the framework of white supremacy and white skin privilege.

Sometimes when people talk about “white supremacy” they simply mean racist practices, and they want to indicate a more systematic understanding of those practices. Black feminist bell hooks, for instance, said she decided to use the term “white supremacy” rather than racism because only white supremacy captures the more comprehensive and subtle forms of race politics. Or “white supremacist” is used to refer to the racist terrorists who yearn for the return of the slave Confederacy, as well as the dangerous throwbacks to Jim Crow segregation in our midst today. For critical race theorists, however, with their black nationalist core beliefs, something quite different is intended. For CRT, white supremacy is seen as a political system of global social history. Typical of this view is Jamaican CRT philosopher Charles Mills:

“Global white supremacy ... is *itself* a political system, a particular power structure of formal and informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution

of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties.”

Mills even writes about a white supremacist state.

For CRT white supremacy is a global system where white people hold the power and resources. For Marxists in contrast, power is held by the ruling class, since it is the capitalists who own the means of production and extract surplus value from workers. The working class lacks power because workers are forced to sell their labor power to survive. *This is the fundamental relationship hidden by CRT and its claim that power is in the hands of white people.* Understanding this is key to formulating a program to root out inequality and the racism which reflects the capitalist reality.

The framework of white supremacy treats all white people as a self-interested monolithic group although it is clear that they are class-divided. Some CRT advocates acknowledge that not all whites are better off than all non-whites; they point to the statistical average, but this directs attention away from the all the ways millions of working-class people are exploited and many driven into poverty. Thus the effects of class exploitation are masked by CRT’s blanket assertions of white supremacy and white privilege. Nor can the framework of white supremacy deal with the racist demonization of groups that are not necessarily skin-color-identified – Muslims and wearers of the hijab, refugees, immigrants and asylum-seekers displaced by capitalism, Roma and Travelers, and most historically breathtaking, Jews.

Far from capturing the decisive forms of racism, the white supremacy framework deflects attention away from the history of social relations that are part of the mode of production. CRT theorists document endless years of continuity of racist language and cultural practice, but they de-contextualize those practices from historical materialist conditions that gave rise to those practices. Unlike CRT, Marxism situates racism in its historical and contemporaneous *interconnections* with capitalism. Racism is a reflection of, and dialectically interacts with, racial oppression.

So the best studies of racism rely on Marxist categories and the articulation of the history of those interconnections between race and the mode of production and reproduction. The work of C.L.R. James, for instance, or the pioneering *Slavery and*

University of Wisconsin



University of South Carolina



**Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate.**



*Capitalism* by Eric Williams. Williams was one of the first to document how the triangular slave trade and the large-scale production, largely of sugar, in the slave plantation system was decisive in the primitive accumulation of capital to power the industrial revolution and capitalist empire. He showed how all components of the English establishment – church, state and aristocracy – promoted and sustained the trade and grew rich off it.

Peter Fryer in his masterful and horrifying account of British racism, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (1984), distinguishes between racial prejudice on one hand – largely the ignorant and irrational fear of “the other” that predates capitalism – and, on the other hand, the racism that is the ideological handmaiden and justification of economic profit: slavery, the slave trade and then imperialist empire. It is that racism – embedded and structural – that we live with today.

Fryer documents how racism was mobilized in the 18th century to defend the British economy utterly dependent on the slave trade; how the economy was reinforced with a scramble of racist stereotypes inherited from folklore, pseudo-science and crazy conjecture. The form of racism that coalesced in Europe and in the U.S. arose from the political battles fought over the slave trade and slavery, during the last decades of the 18th century and the first decades of the 19th. The men who set out to enshrine and protect slavery assembled a vast arsenal of new claims and old ideas about black people and Africans, which they then codified, refined and disseminated through books, pamphlets, cartoons and speeches. The defense of the most brutal racist practices was promoted by the most respectable and cultured people in the 18th and 19th centuries (Thomas Carlyle, Dickens, Trollope, Matthew Arnold).

High-ranking scientists such as the taxonomist Carl Linnaeus as well as the influential racist propagandist Edward Long marketed the most extreme pseudo-scientific racism at home and in the Americas. In the midst of the flowering of the Enlightenment with its theories of natural rights, the defenders of slavery argued that Africans were a sub-human species. And that list includes Thomas Jefferson in his hideously racist *Notes on Virginia*. Of the first dozen U.S. presidents, only the ones named Adams were not slave holders.

All of that newly congealed racism justified the enormous profits of the West Indian and U.S. forced labor camps for the plantocracy. The ideas about the nature and character of enslaved peoples from Africa that had been marshalled by the pro-slavery lobby took root and lived on, notably in the grotesque stereotype of “lazy black people” used to justify racist discrimination and terror, when all of the backbreaking labor was performed by black slaves. Many, in more subtle forms, are still with us today.

### Reactionary Skin Game

The framework of white supremacy becomes a particularly reactionary disorganizer of solidarity in struggle as it expresses its logical correlation of “white skin privilege.” These so-called privileges are usually thought of as the everyday currency paid to the depository of white supremacy. The Ladson-Billings article as well as many other CRT critics refer to the 1988 article by Wellesley professor Peggy McIntosh, where she writes about her

“invisible backpack” that contains her stash of white privileges, and she itemizes some 50 or so privileges. Some of these include:

“I can go shopping alone most of the time, fairly well assured that I will not be followed or harassed by store detectives.

“Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance that I am financially reliable.

“If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.

“I can be reasonably sure that if I ask to talk to ‘the person in charge,’ I will be facing a person of my race.”

There are plenty more of these “privileges” stashed in her “invisible back pack.”

While much of the discussion of white skin privilege focuses on daily outrages, critical race theorists have bigger fish to fry. Let’s see how one of our CUNY colleagues and my friend John Garvey, who despite our disagreements is an important anti-racist thinker, along with Noel Ignatiev (who recently died) set up the bigger problem in their journal *Race Traitor*:

“The white race is a historically constructed social formation. It consists of all those who partake of the privileges of the white skin in this society. Its most wretched members share a status higher, in certain respects, than that of the most exalted persons excluded from it....

“The key to solving the social problems of our age is to abolish the white race, which means no more and no less than abolishing the privileges of white skin. Until that task is accomplished, even partial reform will prove elusive.... Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity.”

Notice the word, “until.” Again, the idea of “race first” is meant not only to indicate interpretive primacy, but is understood as a necessary stage in social transformation. And such statements suggesting the abolition of “whiteness” are open to misinterpretation when white *people* are seen as the toxic carriers of white supremacy and privilege.

As an analytical tool the concept of “white skin privilege” stands racism on its head seeing it as a beneficial system for all white people rather than an effective disorganizer of unified class struggle, including struggle against racism. The idea of white skin privilege echoes the implicit ruling class pitch to white workers and the poor: You may be miserable and exploited, but at least you benefit from not being black. The idea is that whites will accept large disparities in economic and social opportunity so long as they hold perceived advantage over blacks. So long as they can look down on the black faces at the bottom of the well. CRT advocates argue that white workers identify with their rulers on the basis of race but fail to acknowledge how their own promotion of white skin privilege aids the rulers’ anti-working class and racist campaigns.

This white skin privilege game has been going on for a long time, but has reached a fever pitch now in colleges and schools. In the spirit of this ethos of “wokeness,” young people are supposed to check their age privilege; however, in my dotage I supposedly have “experience privilege.” So let me take you back some decades to when this “theory” was in its infancy. At its 1969 National Convention in Chicago, Students for a Demo-

cratic Society split into three factions. The New Left Weatherman faction was an ardent advocate and practitioner of the idea of “checking” white skin privilege. The members – almost all white and pretty wealthy – conducted guilt-ridden confessional sessions about their white privileges in the self-criticism style of the Chinese Communist Party’s “Cultural Revolution.” The working-class side of the split was made up of a number of tendencies including Progressive Labor and the Spartacist League.

It also contained a small group called the Labor Committee that was led by a former Socialist Workers Party member Lyn Marcus, soon to be known as Lyndon Larouche as the group went bat-shit crazy into the neo-fascist right-wing swamp. But for a brief moment in 1969, the Labor Committee was sort of Luxemburgist politically and lined up on the working-class side in the split. They distributed to the convention a leaflet that I still remember 50 years later. (And I have forgotten quite a few leaflets in that time.) It was a Swiftian proposal directed against the Weathermen (whose name was taken from the Bob Dylan lyric, “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.”) The heading of the Labor Committee leaflet was: “You don’t need a thermometer to know who’s an asshole.” The leaflet began by providing data on the differential of black and white life expectancy and then proposed to address the “white skin privilege” of white workers by having them line up at their respective workplaces to kill themselves when they reached the average age of black life expectancy.

### Revolutionary Program vs. No Program

So how do we Marxists respond to this “race first” ideology? First of all, we do not concede the field of anti-racism to anybody. Our program holds the promise of black liberation through socialist revolution. And we seek in the here-and-now to mobilize the power of the multi-racial working class to fight racism in all of its expressions – overt and subtle – and to defend black rights wherever they are threatened, including the right to integrated quality education. Because the international proletariat as a social class historically and objectively developed with capitalist industrialization – as Marx said, capitalism creates its own grave diggers – we can mount a revolutionary program for a workers government building towards an egalitarian socialist society. Not so for CRT or feminists, they have no such revolutionary program.

Ladson-Billings and Tate wrestle with the possibility that class may also be a determining factor in the structure of educational inequalities; however, they settle on race first.

“Although both class and gender can and do intersect race, as stand-alone variables they do not explain all of the educational achievement differences between whites and students of color.”

But Marxists never treat class as a discrete “stand-alone variable.” Failing to acknowledge the historically developed, objective and unique character of social class, the authors reduce a dynamic historical materialist *programmatic* approach to racial and gender oppression to one of a number of “stand-alone variables.”

To deal with the programmatic dead-end of feminism and black sectoralism, they invented *intersectionality*. Whereas CRT contends that race is the primary contradiction in society and the primary source of oppression, Marxist analysis explains how class is at the root of all manner of social oppression. Intersectionality in its postmodern approach drifts to the idea that there is no primary contradiction, just a lot of interconnected sources of oppression. This view – now the default position in academia – is just a theoretically souped-up version of identity politics. People have many and shifting identities that intersect – race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Of course, there are many sources of oppression. The *Internationalist* article on the myth of the white working class<sup>5</sup> projected a New York City subway worker who may identify as a woman, an African American, a labor activist, and gay. On any given day she may personally experience oppression most acutely on the basis of any one of these. But it is only with her class position mobilized into collective action that as a worker she can exert power to transform the economic basis of society that underlies the many forms of oppression.

While critical race theorists along with most modern academics have generally dismissed Marxism as old hat, those in the Marxist tradition have not launched much of a direct counter-attack against CRT. One exception is Mike Cole, whose book, *Critical Race Theory and Education: A Marxist Response* (2017), claims the mantle of orthodox Marxism. Cole, a professor at East London University along with Glenn Rikowski, Dave Hill, and a U.S. advocate of Paulo Freire’s “pedagogy of liberation,” Peter McLaren, see themselves as “independent” Marxist scholars and educators in battle against anti-Marxist postmodernists.

In his book, Cole offers a number of rejoinders to CRT about the objective character of class and why Marxists don’t

<sup>5</sup> “The Myth of a ‘White Working Class,’” *The Internationalist* No. 46, January-February 2017.

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adopt the historical framework of “white supremacy,” making many of the points I made earlier. He acknowledges the contradiction between CRT and Marxism, but hopes fondly for a possible alignment of CRT and Marxism; he uses the term “racialized capitalism” to try to fudge the differences. Yet a non-racist capitalism is impossible. Finally, he exposes the anti-Marxist side of his politics with homage to Hugo Chávez and Venezuela as a “beacon of [educational] enlightenment” with “the potential for twenty-first century socialism.” Chávez’ regime is a left-nationalist brand of bourgeois populism, not proletarian socialism.

Critical race theorists as well as feminist critics falsely accuse Marxists of working within a “grand narrative” that suppresses the importance of race and gender. Marxism is regularly faulted for an assumed narrow mechanical economism, a charge made often on the basis of a Stalinized caricature of dialectical materialism. For critical race theorists it amounts to a charge that we Marxists ignore race in favor of class. Crenshaw for instance says, “The typical Marxist error is subsuming race under class.” For Mills it is that what he calls “White Marxism [that] fails to recognize the import and social reality of race.” They charge that Marxists see history as colorless classes in struggle. Race is just tacked on.

Despite the accusations of CRT and feminist discourse theorists, Marx and Engels were not mechanical and economist in their understanding of the way superstructure and economic base interact. Marxists do not think that economic conditions are the only active causes and all other phenomena are just passive effects.

Yes, we hold that we live in class society and that class is objectively defined by relations to the means of production. Furthermore, we understand that a physically coercive state and legal system preserves capitalism and its property forms. But we are also part of a dynamic interpretive tradition. We expose how language and culture are employed to naturalize, disguise, and render harmless the real relations of class domination and racism. Particularly in the U.S. with its legacy of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, every struggle for democratic rights is based on fighting against the embedded racist ideology that justifies the segregation of black people at the bottom of the socio-economic order. We actively engage in exposing the mask of bourgeois racist practice and ideology. In the U.S. it is inconceivable that a revolutionary struggle can occur in which Black people do not play a central role.

Contrary to the claims of CRT theorists, authentic Marxists are not “color-blind” like Bernie Sanders, the bourgeois Democratic presidential contender and pseudo-socialist hailed by many opportunist leftists. We agree with CRT about the pervasive existence of racism worldwide, but unlike proponents of identity politics, we put forward a revolutionary program of aggressive color-conscious efforts to address the structural racism embedded in capitalism. We critically defend affirmative action, for instance, against racism disguised as “color-blind” neutrality. We welcome feminist literary studies, for instance, that have enriched the understanding of sexism and the constraints of language and custom, particularly in Shakespeare

studies and Victorian literature. But we understand such valuable critical interpretations are not a positive program for the transformation of society and liberation of women.

Marxists are attentive to culture, language and human agency in history, including particularly the material forces of racism. As the opening of his pamphlet on *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Karl Marx declares: “Men make history but they do not make it just as they please ... but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.” That includes the ideological and linguistic “dead hand of the past” that hampers human efforts at liberation. So while the conditions of production and the historical role of the proletariat within those conditions are objective, the *consciousness* of workers of their historical role is quite another matter. And a lot more complicated. As Marx makes clear in his *Preface to a Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*:

“In considering such [revolutionary] transformations a distinction should always be made between the material economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.”

An important part of that fight for consciousness is the organization of a vanguard party that leads the multi-racial working class in anti-racist struggle. Socialist revolution in the U.S. will happen only with vital black leadership. And even in its infancy that multi-racial leadership will embody the revolutionary content of Marxism against all forms of idealist sectoralism, including critical race theory. ■



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# Identity/Privilege Politics in Action

## Implicit Bias, Inc.

For decades, in response to every mass struggle for black rights and those of other oppressed groups in the United States, along with a reactionary backlash to undo limited gains, there has been a campaign to portray the ingrained racism and social oppression of U.S. society to a matter of individual psychology or behavior. The massive protests that swept the country in the summer of 2020 following the racist cop murder of George Floyd achieved no lasting gains at all. Racist police terror continues unabated: 2,079 killed by cops in 2021.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, as of December 2021, 66 state-level educational gag orders have been filed to censor teaching about race, gender and American history, of which a dozen have already become law. And now supposedly anti-racist diversity/bias training is being used to scapegoat educators for the racial and class segregation of the schools that is the result of *liberals* blocking integration.

In the wake of the civil rights movement, the 1964 Civil Rights Act made it illegal for all but the smallest employers to discriminate on the basis of race, color, sex, religion or national origin in hiring, pay, training, promotion or any other term of employment. A 1971 Supreme Court decision reinforced this by ruling that no proof of intent to discriminate was needed. Since such practices are woven into the fabric of American capitalism, diversity training programs soon arose to help employers adapt to the law – or more to the point, to deflect discrimination law suits. Then after the first wave of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests following racist police murders of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in New York City in 2014, a majority of states ordered “implicit bias training” for police and other government employees. Lot of good that did!<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, Big Business – or at least many sectors of it – was climbing on board. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (D.E.I.) programs became a growth industry, and a very lucrative one. Rather than taking on deep-rooted racial oppression, “diversity” meant a token sprinkling of “representation,” while “equity” was a vague sense of fairness. Highly paid D.E.I. consultants were brought in to navigate sticky situations and to ideologically clean house by instilling inclusive rhetoric and practices. Corporations began hiring “chief diversity officers.” According to a 2016 *Harvard Business Review* analysis, “nearly half of midsize companies use it [diversity training], as do nearly all the *Fortune* 500.” Yet evidence indicated that “positive effects of diversity training rarely last beyond a day or two, and a number of studies suggest that it can activate bias or spark a backlash.”

By 2019, companies were spending approximately \$8 billion annually on diversity endeavors, and job postings for D.E.I. professionals had increased by 35%, according to the



EMPLOYEES & CULTURE

Building belonging at Google

**D.E.I. is a big business, to help big businesses burnish their "socially responsible" corporate image. Shown here some of the companies that advertise their "wokeness."**



employment website Indeed (“Diversity Has Become a Booming Business. So Where Are the Results?” *Time*, 10 October 2019). Results? For the capitalists, it’s all about appearances and having a “socially responsible” corporate image. So after millions took to the streets to protest police terror and systemic racism after George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis cop, corporations figured they had to up their game. Quaker Oats

**For Black Liberation Through Socialist Revolution**



decided to get rid of the racist, 130-year-old Aunt Jemima mammy caricature. Like they just then noticed it was offensive? No, they made a marketing decision. Other firms incorporated BLM-inflected imagery, seeking to cash in as part of a Brave New World of “woke capitalism.”

“Black Lives Matter Protests Move Corporate D&I Initiatives Center Stage,” headlined *Forbes* magazine (17 June 2020), the self-described “capitalist tool.” In this profit-driven system, some companies now tie executive and board pay to diversity targets. In 2019, one-sixth of Microsoft chief executive Satya Nadella’s \$10.8 million bonus came from meeting diversity targets. Microsoft praised this as “an important demonstration of executive commitment to creating an inclusive workplace” (“Want More Diversity? Some Experts Say Reward C.E.O.s for It,” *New York Times* 14 July 2020). The same for a quarter of Uber chief executive Dara Khosrowshahi’s performance-based \$6.25 million stock awards. Meanwhile, Uber drivers get starvation wages and work long hours as “independent contractors” with no union. Inclusion? Not hardly.

Meanwhile, in response to the virulent racist reaction whipped up by Republican Donald Trump, liberals and Democratic “progressives” increasingly embraced identity and “privilege” politics. Anti-racist protest organizers called to *segregate* demonstrations, ordering: “White people move to the back!” In colleges and universities, “Critical Race Theory” (CRT) – with its themes of “microaggressions,” hate speech codes and “intersectionality” to deal with crisscrossing identities – has flourished. Originating in law schools, CRT became de rigueur in women’s studies, black studies, and teacher education programs. As Trump issued a ban on diversity training, the right wing sought to demonize “CRT” and make the term “toxic.” The Trumpers’ actual intent was to pass laws or education department rulings to ban or censor any teaching of the truth about the racist history of the United States.<sup>3</sup>

The stark reality is that no amount of “anti-racist” image polishing or training to avoid “implicit bias” or “microaggressions” can substantially alter the racism that is built into the capitalist system – historically, structurally, ideologically and in every other way. CRT is based on the defeatist acceptance of capitalism as eternal. Change is only deemed possible within the confines of this system based on exploitation of labor reinforced by double and triple oppression of millions on the basis of race, gender and other forms of social exclusion and subordination. While identity/privilege politics focuses on idealist constructs and individual behaviors, revolutionary Marxists go to the roots of the racist ideology arising from *the material conditions of oppression rooted in the capitalist*



**Identity/privilege politics is based on acceptance of the racism that is built into the capitalist system, posing issues of education, health and economic well-being as a competition for “privileges” rather than to fight for equality and root out racism through socialist revolution.**

system. The only way to eradicate those conditions, and all the ideological racist filth that comes with them, is through socialist revolution.

### Selling White Guilt

In the summer of 2020, the name of Robin DiAngelo, author of *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Race* (2018), was ubiquitous. As of April 2021, *White Fragility* had been on the *New York Times* bestseller list continuously for 136 weeks. Amid George Floyd protests it was lauded by many activists as one of the most timely and pertinent books on the market. On “Blackout Tuesday” (2 June 2020, when brands and individuals “blacked out” screens in a social media event), Instagram users promoted the book as a must-read. To attend one of DiAngelo’s seminars, white progressives paid \$65 to \$160 a head to feel the “racial shame” that DiAngelo promotes. In *White Fragility*, she writes: “All white people are invested in and collude with racism,” and “The white collective fundamentally hates blackness for what it reminds us of: that we are capable and guilty of perpetrating immeasurable harm and that our gains come through the subjugation of others.” What she is selling, in her book, presentations and interviews, is white guilt:

“All white people have internalized a racist worldview. Let me own that. As a result of being raised as a white person in this society, I have a racist worldview. I have deep racist biases. I have developed racist patterns, and I have investments in not only the system of racism that has served me so well. It’s so comfortable. But I also have an investment in not seeing any of that because of what I believe it suggests about my identity as a good person.”

–“Why White Liberals Are So Unwilling to Recognize Their Own Racism,” *Slate*, 2 August 2018

Racist ideology is deeply embedded in the capitalist system, justifying massive inequality and oppression and is often consciously fostered by capitalists in order to undercut united

<sup>3</sup> See “Mobilize to Fight Racist ‘Anti-CRT’ Gag Laws!” on page xx of this issue. Such



**The “privilege walk.” Participants are told to take a step forward or back according to their “positionality.” The goal of this implicit bias training technique is to end up with everyone segregated according to race, gender, etc. Basic democratic rights are portrayed as “unearned privilege.”**

class struggle. But the ideology of white guilt, by focusing on the individual and diverting attention from the social and economic underpinnings of racist ideology, is entirely compatible with and even promoted by capitalism. Thus DiAngelo, whose workshops go for \$15,000 a pop (at one point she was making eight to ten presentations a month), is routinely invited to give private workshops and presentations “to schools, faculties and government agencies and university administrations and companies like Microsoft and Google and W.L. Gore & Associate, the maker of Gore-Tex” (“‘White Fragility’ Is Everywhere. But Does Antiracism Training Work?” *New York Times*, 15 July 2020).

As a sociologist, DiAngelo claims to have the credentials, as well as experiential knowledge as a white person, to spout generalities about “all white people.” As she expounds upon the deeply racist history of the United States, and even admits that the subjugation of black people as slaves came *before* racist ideologies, her crackpot idealist conclusions are counterposed to a materialist understanding of black oppression: “The system of racism begins with ideology which refers to the big ideas that are reinforced throughout society” (*White Fragility*). So for DiAngelo, who was trained in a Jesuit university, “In the beginning was the word” (John 1:1) while for materialists, “in the beginning was the deed” (J.W. Goethe, *Faust*). Revolutionary Marxists have analyzed that black people in the United States are a doubly oppressed sector, key to the political economy but kept at the bottom of U.S. society.

Yes, many white liberals believe that “color-blind” attitudes magically transcend race, that racism is about whether someone is a good or a bad person, or even that racism was abolished with the civil rights laws of 1964-67. But that is not because “white people are the beneficiaries of that separation and inequality” (*White Fragility*). Rather, such views reflect the liberal, pro-Democratic Party political outlook of working within the capitalist system that beats down black people, literally in the case of systemic racist police brutality,

and also in every other facet of daily life, whether in education, housing, employment, etc. And ideologues of white guilt such as Robin DiAngelo share that political framework and system, in which they are indeed invested (it pays them well, anyway) and which, day in and day out, relentlessly perpetuates racism.

To be sure, the all-round racist, misogynist and xenophobic ex-president Donald Trump has openly spouted vile white supremacy in its crudest forms. He unleashed federal agents against anti-racist protesters from Washington, D.C. to Portland, Oregon. He emboldened fascist gangs and fascistic militias, and launched a racist lynch mob at the U.S. Capitol

on 6 January 2021. These forces are a mortal danger to black people and immigrants, and to all working people and the oppressed. But don’t forget that it was the black Democratic mayor of Philadelphia, Wilson Goode, who sanctioned the 1985 Mother’s Day bombing of the black MOVE commune, while black Democratic president Barack Obama became the deporter-in-chief of millions of immigrants, and black Democratic mayors Lori Lightfoot (Chicago) and Keisha Lance Bottoms (Atlanta) ordered police to repress BLM protesters and activists.

### **Liberals Dump Integration, Blame Teachers for Racism in the Schools**

Faced with the onslaught of reactionary attacks on anti-racist education in the name of opposing “Critical Race Theory,” the response of the teachers unions – National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) – and the fallback position of liberals has been to argue that CRT is not taught in K-12 schools. True, and not true. The “theory” is pretty much confined to higher education, but many of the practices it has spawned are widespread in teacher training and “professional development” in elementary and secondary schools. And while supposedly designed to ferret out and confront deep-seated racial bias, they can have the opposite effect, causing resentment and in some cases pushing teachers, students and parents toward sinister racist forces. They are a substitute for a real struggle against segregation, discrimination and racial oppression, while serving to obscure and hide the material bases of institutional and systemic racism.

In 2018, Richard Carranza was named schools chancellor by NYC mayor Bill de Blasio. Carranza declared that New York City public schools have “a system of segregation that is baked into the system.” That is certainly accurate. He vowed repeatedly, “No, we will not wait to integrate our schools, we will not wait to dismantle the segregated systems we have!” But after a year in office, he was on the way out and singing



New York Post

**White Supremacy Culture**

1. Perfectionism
2. Sense of Urgency
3. Defensiveness
4. Quantity Over Quality
5. Worship of the Written Word
6. Only one right way
7. Paternalism
8. Either/or thinking
9. Power Hoarding
10. Fear of Open Conflict
11. Individualism
12. Progress is Bigger, More
13. Objectivity
14. Right to Comfort

**PERFECTIONISM** — Giving undue focus to the shortcomings in someone or their work, or viewing them as personal flaws. "Making a mistake is confused with being a mistake, doing wrong with being wrong," according to a description of the book on the Web site for the "Challenging White Supremacy Workshop."

**SENSE OF URGENCY** — Prioritizing short-term results without considering long-term implications. "For example, sacrificing interests of communities of color in order to win victories for white people," the write-up says.

**DEFENSIVENESS** — When people, often in power, are dismissive of new ideas solely for fear that they might shake things up. "The defensiveness of people in power creates an oppressive culture," the description says.

**QUANTITY OVER QUALITY** — Being results-oriented and diminishing an otherwise-sound process if it doesn't produce measurable results. It also goes hand-in-hand with "discomfort with emotion and feelings."

**WORSHIP OF THE WRITTEN WORD** — This idea prioritizes documentation and writing skills, rather than the "ability to relate to others." It also leads to teaching that there is "only one right way" to do something.

**PATERNALISM** — When those already in power think they're the only ones who can or should make decisions. "Those with power often don't think it is important or necessary to understand the viewpoint or experience of those for whom they are making decisions," the write-up explains.

**EITHER/OR THINKING** — Seeing things in terms of good or bad, right or wrong, or black or white. This "results in trying to simplify complex things, for example believing that poverty is simply a result of lack of education."

**POWER HOARDING** — Similar to defensiveness, those in power seek to preserve it, and see it as something that can't be shared. They may also feel threatened when someone suggests change, and "assume they have the best interests of the organization at heart."

**FEAR OF OPEN CONFLICT** — This comes through when someone overemphasizes politeness, and equates broaching touchy topics with being rude. "The response is to blame the person for raising the issue rather than to look at the issue which is actually causing the problem," the description says.

**INDIVIDUALISM** — This idea is found among people who have "little experience or comfort working as part of a team." It can lead to isolation, and emphasize competition over cooperation.

**PROGRESS IS BIGGER, MORE** — Focusing only on the bottom line and tangible growth. "Progress is an organization which expands . . . or develops the ability to serve more people," those with this mindset think.

**OBJECTIVITY** — This can lead to the belief that there is an ultimate truth and that alternative viewpoints or emotions are bad. It's even inherent in "the belief that there is such a thing as being objective."

**RIGHT TO COMFORT** — Those in power may believe that they "have a right to emotional and psychological comfort," while denying the same to those not in power. This also covers cries of reverse racism because that's "equating individual acts of unfairness against white people with systemic racism which daily targets people of color."

Jones, K., & Okun, T. (2001). *Dismantling racism: a workbook for social change groups*. Amherst, MA: Peace Development Fund.

PowerPoint slide from 2019 NYC Department of Education "professional development" session for administrators. The categories are from the widely used textbook, *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups* by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun.

a different tune. In an interview with the *New York Times* (24 August 2019), Carranza remarked, "If I integrated the system, the next thing I'm going to do is I'm going to walk on water." A few days later, a School Diversity Advisory Group, which had been appointed by de Blasio, submitted a report, *Making the Grade II: New Programs for Better Schools* (August 2019), calling to gradually phase out "gifted and talented" programs and to make screening for middle schools and high schools more diverse. The mayor's response to these limited demands was to blow them off, out of fear of the political backlash.

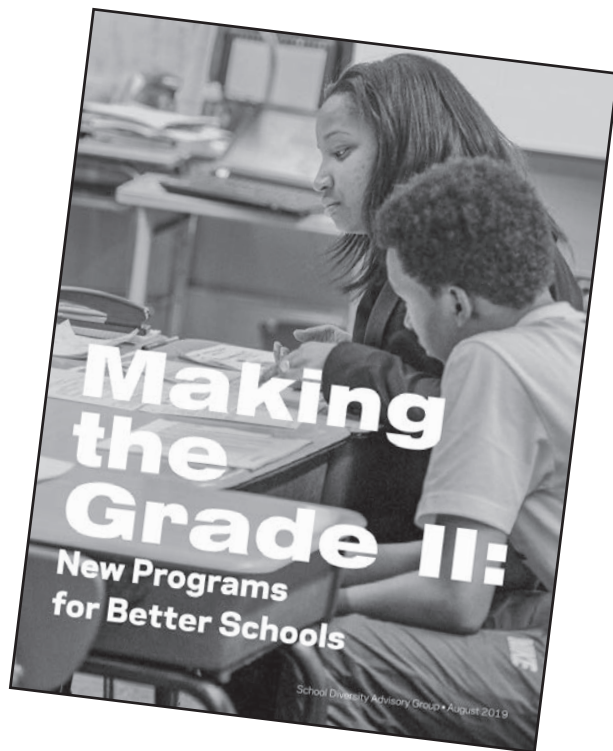
With actual school integration a dead letter, the NYC Department of Education (D.O.E.) turned to Carranza's \$23 million two-year initiative of mandatory five-hour implicit bias (IB) training for all 125,000 Department of Education employees as a "cornerstone" of his racial equity platform. So instead of going after the extreme racial and class segregation of New York City schools – which shortchange the 75% low income and 70% black and Hispanic student body, as well as Asian and white poor and working-class students – educators were targeted as the *root cause of institutional and structural racism*. In the introductory prompt of Module 3 of a D.O.E. online workshop, on "Implicit Bias and the Brain," we read that "Brain science shows us that most of our actions occur without conscious thought," so going after IB can have an "impact on our relationships, institutions and culture." "Brain science"? This is the CRT precept that unconscious biases and "micro-

aggressions" are key to the pervasive racism of U.S. society.

A handbook of *Key Equity Terms & Concepts* provided with the D.O.E. IB training includes such terms as "white fragility" – "A range of defensive (and centering) emotions and behaviors that White people exhibit when confronted with uncomfortable truths about race" – and "white privilege" – "The unearned power and advantages that benefit people just by virtue of being White or being perceived as White." According to CRT, all white people benefit from privileges. How this translates in practice can be seen in some of the common "training" methods. For example, "privilege walks": a "high risk" "introspective exercise" designed "to highlight the fact that everyone has SOME privilege, even as some people have more privilege than others." Everyone starts off in a straight, horizontal line. A designated person reads ready-made statements prompting participants to take a step back or forward. Steps forward indicate privileges/advantages over others. Steps backward indicate the opposite. Statements read,

"If you grew up in an urban setting take one step backward," "If you came from a supportive family environment take one step forward," "If there were more than 50 books in your house growing up take one step forward," and "If you are a white male take one step forward."

By the end of the activity participants should be racially segregated at opposite ends of the room (that's the *goal*). This dictates one's "positionality" in society. To accomplish this



**August 2019 report of School Diversity Advisory Group advocated limited first steps toward integrating NYC public education. Mayor Bill de Blasio, who appointed the panel, ignored the report. The next month the D.O.E. rolled out implicit bias training program, implicitly blaming teachers for racism in NYC schools.**

effect, the activity banks on a slew of stereotypes. It feeds the racist narrative that all black people grow up in urban settings with unsupportive families that don't read. This kind of "privilege politics" is drilled into prospective teachers. Basic democratic rights that everyone should have become "unearned privileges."

Rights seen as the norm for most in society are not privileges, which are special benefits above and beyond the norm, bestowed on an upper crust. Denial of and exclusion from such rights is a form of special oppression, not an absence of "privilege." And concretely, the idea that black equality would be at the expense of most whites, requiring that they be pushed downwards and made to live worse than they already do, is a lie. It is the line of the racists, and poison for any real anti-racist struggle. The rulers of society, according to this crap, are all white people, rather than the capitalist exploiters and oppressors. Instead of confronting and stopping real racists, everyone should feel degrees of discomfort. Rather than combatting black oppression, racism should be a shared burden (see article on "Straight Talk About 'Privilege' and Oppression," on page 34). This is an apology for racist capitalism.

Another device is the IB test. A university educator from California writes: "Before the training, they have you take this 30-minute test that's supposed to measure your implicit bias. It's very easy to manipulate to get whatever result you want. The test would generate images on the screen of people from different

racess and ethnic groups, and you would have to respond to the question, 'Which do you prefer implicitly?' It would measure how long your responses took. That was supposed to judge your implicit bias. You were supposed to print out the results and bring it to the training where you were supposed to talk about it and confess all of your racist thoughts to get rid of them.... In the end, there was no real action, no discussion about the social-economic roots of racism. Just the bad thoughts in our heads."

Why African Americans and Latinos are pushed to the bottom is not addressed. Participants just have to *feel*. And if they are white, they must feel *bad*. *Really bad*.

Another feature of these DEI trainings are the racially segregated "affinity groups/spaces." A Bay Area charter school teacher reported: "They would present a few slides about implicit bias and racism in the workplace. Then we would be racially and ethnically segregated into these study groups. So, there was the African American group, the white group, the Latinx group, and so forth. There was one group called 'Across Differences,' which I joined because it was a multi-racial setting. But they got rid of that group and now you can only be part of a group 'of your own kind.'" In another meeting, "a white teacher pointed out that the school would be more committed to diversity and equity if they retained qualified teachers of color instead of firing them and defended a black teacher who had been recently fired." These comments were portrayed as a racist provocation against the black principal.

When the D.O.E. was ramping up its mandatory "implicit bias" training sessions, there was an outcry in right-wing media, particularly (predictably) in the *New York Post*, with headlines like "Get on board or be called a 'bigot': dilemma facing parents against Carranza's 'Diversity,'" and "Richard Carranza held 'white-supremacy culture' training for school admins." The stories consisted of anonymous quotes, particularly from white top-level D.O.E. officials who filed a \$90 million racist lawsuit claiming "they were pushed aside for less qualified persons of color" ("Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza accused of demoting admins because they were white," *New York Post*, 18 May 2019).

But while racist media peddled "insider" quotes that "whiteness" had become "toxic" under Carranza, the D.O.E. was using PowerPoint presentations labeling concepts like "perfectionism" and "sense of urgency" as examples of "White Supremacy Culture." Combatting racist discrimination and hostility toward African Americans and Latinos is essential, but not with crackpot claims about "brain science" claiming that all white people are implicitly or unconsciously racist. As the CRT advocates try to guilt-trip white liberals for microaggressions, the oppressed non-white majority in New York City has to fend off *macroaggressions*, such as from the NYPD, with its racist "stop and frisk" policies (which the new mayor, ex-cop Eric Adams, wants to bring back). Instead of targeting and scapegoating educators as supposedly a bunch of implicitly biased privilege-mongers, a real fight against racism would start by *kicking the cops out of the schools*, and *shutting down the school-to-prison pipeline* that sends tens of thousands of black and Latino youths to the hellhole of Rikers Island.



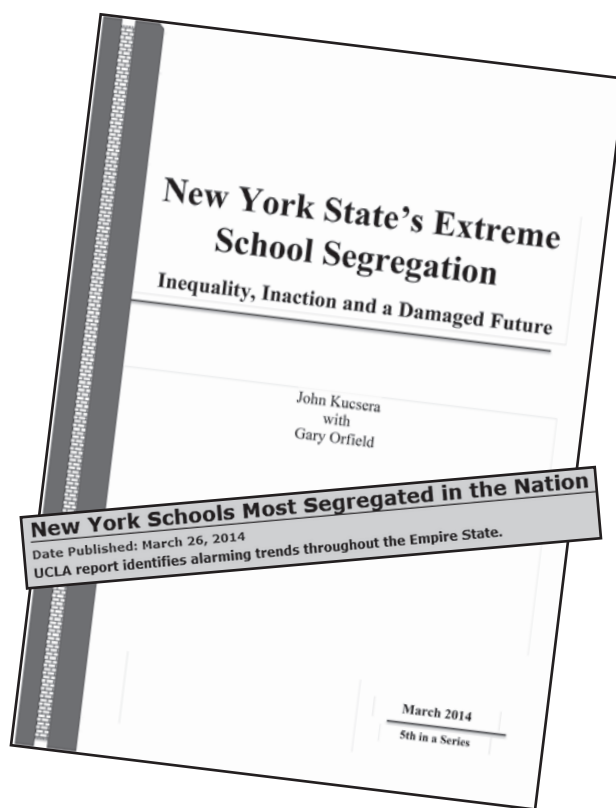
## Racism Is Systemic in the U.S. – The System Is Capitalism

From mainstream media to social media, in protests and the schools, Critical Race Theory and identity politics have become the normalized rules of decorum and political armament for many everyday liberals. Yet hard-core CRT and the likes of Robin DiAngelo, with their “white privilege/guilt” line, are a bit much for some Democratic Party “progressives” like American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Randi Weingarten. So while verbally condemning the anti-“CRT” culture warriors – but not mobilizing the union’s ranks to fight the laws banning teaching about racism – the AFT last summer launched a “Stamping Out Racism and Hate” campaign. The kick-off at the union’s TEACH conference in July featured a keynote talk by Ibram X. Kendi, author of *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019) – as well as greetings from Jill Biden. The union also put out a special “relatable remix” of Kendi’s book, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (2106).

In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi writes of “racist policies leading to racist ideas, not the other way around, as we have commonly thought,” of “eliminating racist policies if we ever hope to eliminate racist ideas.” This is a step forward from the implicit bias training that focuses on rooting out supposedly unconscious ideas, and even non-existent ideas. For Kendi, “Racism is a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities.” The AFT liked the message “because policies and practices can be changed” (“Anti-racist education benefits all of us,” aft.org, 7 July 2021). Kendi argues that “racist policy” is a better term than “institutional racism,” “structural racism,” or “systemic racism,” because these terms are vaguer. True, policies can be changed. Or not. And progressive changes can be reversed. But racism in the U.S. goes beyond policy. It has been fundamental to American capitalism since birth, from chattel slavery to Jim Crow segregation to ghetto poverty, mass incarceration and police terror.

Early in Kendi’s *How to* book he recounts how his parents, living in Queens Village in New York City, enrolled him in a private school on Long Island. He writes, “Black New Yorkers with the wherewithal to do it were separating their children from poor Black children in poor Black neighborhoods, just like White New Yorkers were separating their children from Black children.” At the school, with a majority black student body, 7-year-old Kendi asks the greeter: “Are you the only Black Teacher?” She replies, “Yes, but—.” He cuts her off: “Why are you the only Black teacher?” A good question, and an important one. The fact that 90% of New York City teachers in the 1960s were white while the large majority of the students were African American and Puerto Rican was a detonator of the 1968 NYC teachers strike, as would-be union-busters weaponized this disparity, seeking to set “the community” against unionized teachers.

Why there were only a tiny number of black teachers was indeed directly related to policy. This was not the result of a segregationist law or overt discrimination, but of the use of



**2014 report by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* called for desegregation, found New York schools the most segregated in the U.S. They still are.**

examinations that, in the name of promoting a “color-blind” meritocracy, in fact kept them out. The New York City Board of Examiners (created in 1898 in a fight against political patronage) excluded many African American applicants in oral exams because of their accents, while the written exams measured knowledge that people from an educated middle-class family might know, not pedagogy. The original Teachers Union, led by supporters of the Communist Party, complained in the 1950s that the NYC exams were excluding qualified black and Hispanic teachers who passed national exams. But after repression destroyed the CP-led TU, the United Federation of Teachers, led by anti-communist social democrat Albert Shanker, backed the Board, which continued its restrictive exams until the NY state legislature abolished it in 1990.<sup>4</sup>

With the Board of Examiners gone, policy changed. Using the state licensing exam and with the institution of open admissions at the City University of New York (CUNY) following a 1969 student strike/upheaval at City College, as well as recruitment efforts by the UFT and the schools, the number of black and Latino teachers began growing, reaching 30% in 1992. By 2002, the proportion of non-white teachers was up to 45%, a big increase though still less than Chicago where they were 54%. But then policy changed again, for the worse. Nationally, George W. Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” act forced school districts to use standardized tests in teacher

<sup>4</sup> See Christina Collins, *‘Ethnically Qualified’: Race, Merit and the Selection of Urban Teachers, 1920-1980* (Teachers College Press, 2011).



**Protest by hundreds of NYC students organized by Teens Take Charge outside D.O.E. headquarters demands integration of the schools, 6 June 2019.**

exams, a requirement that Barack Obama's "Race to the Top" continued. In New York City, Mayor Bloomberg pushed through mayoral control of the schools (with the support of the UFT), and then required that uncertified provisional teachers pass a standardized test. Thousands were fired and by 2003 the number of black, Latino and Asian educators fell to 35%.

Under Randi Weingarten, the United Federation of Teachers opposed Bloomberg's racist purge of the teaching force, but didn't mobilize to stop it. Meanwhile, the number of non-white new teachers coming in from CUNY fell, as hiring shifted to programs like Teach for America that brought in white Ivy Leaguers as an internal Peace Corps, passing through while building their social justice resumé (and who would not stay long enough to accrue pensions and salary step raises). This sharp regression sparked opposition within the UFT and a campaign led in particular by Sean Ahern, which the CSEW supported, to increase the number of African American and Hispanic teachers. By 2019, the proportion of non-white New York City educators increased to 42%, but this is in a school system in which 83% of students are African American, Latino or Asian American.<sup>5</sup>

So why are there so few black and Hispanic teachers? It's partly policy, but at bottom it is a result of the racist capitalist system, which keeps reproducing impoverished ghettos and barrios where undersourced K-12 schools do not turn out the large numbers of graduates who could go on to be teachers (who in turn are underpaid).

### For Revolutionary Integrationism

Ibram X. Kendi focuses on replacing racist policy with anti-racist policy. Yet the main impetus for Critical Race

<sup>5</sup> New York State Department of Education, *Educator Diversity Report* (December 2019).

Theory in general, and for the focus on implicit bias training in schools in particular, has been the abject *failure* of efforts to racially integrate U.S. schools. The promise of equality which many saw in the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was blocked, and the 1960s civil rights laws on equal voting rights, employment and housing are steadily rolled back. Liberals have sought to mask this failure and retrogression with euphemistic language. The fight for equality is replaced by "equity," integration is replaced by "diversity," black power is replaced by black "empowerment" – all of which denote gains for some, but not for the vast majority of the oppressed. While the ranks of a black middle class have expanded, CRT is a theory

of defeat, openly abandoning the struggle for social equality even as its proponents are raking in some (earned?) privileges for themselves.

Maybe CRTers can get some traction with their guilt-tripping in the halls of academe, which reek of smarmy liberal "concern" for the downtrodden and the rights of all even as the academics are busy stabbing each other in the back. To claim that all white people have privileges which they must "check" or give up, to assert that they have a material interest in maintaining racism, is factually false. Moreover, as we have underlined, propagating this lie outside the Ivory Tower, undercutting struggles for integration and equality, can have counterproductive effects. The claim that white people as a whole benefit from racism underlay the black nationalism of Marcus Garvey in the 1920s, who with his "return to Africa" movement sought to ally with the KKK – in a period of widespread despair amidst murderous post-World War I anti-black "race riots" by white mobs – while in the 1960s, the Nation of Islam, more interested in carving out markets for black capitalists to exploit, brought the American Nazi Party to a celebration, all to no avail.

Where hardcore CRTers insists that all white people are conscious or unconscious racists, Kendi writes that "'Racist' and 'antiracist' are like peelable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or not doing ...." He calls to "work with antiracist policymakers" and to "deploy antiracist power to compel or drive from power the unsympathetic racist policymakers in order to institute the antiracist policy." So who are these racist policymakers? The reader may presume that these are Trump Republicans. But look at the (failed) history of school integration in the North: it was liberal Democrats who joined with Southern Dixiecrats to bury school busing. Chief among them was one Joe Biden



Internationalist photo



**Class Struggle Education Workers at United Federation of Teachers headquarters, January 7, calling to use union power to keep schools open safely, as well as for police out of the schools and the unions; for smaller class sizes, and to defend public schools against privatization and charterization.**

who famously “reached across the aisle” to work with white supremacist Strom Thurmond to stop busing. And Derrick Bell, the original inspirer of CRT, came to agree with segregationists, holding that the *Brown v. Board of Education* integration case (which he won) was a mistake.

In New York, whose schools are the most racially segregated in the country, Class Struggle Education Workers has fought since its inception in 2008 for the integration of NYC schools. We call to abolish the “gifted and talented” (G&T) programs and schools, to eliminate screening for middle and high schools, to get rid of the elite specialized high schools (several of which, by state law, admit students solely accord-

ing to scores on a very high stakes test), and to fight for *integrated high quality public education for all*. This would require massive expenditure on lowering class sizes, hiring some tens of thousands of new teachers and staff, introducing enrichment programs in all schools, fixing up run-down facilities – the works. It would eliminate the present segregated-by-design system that sets up a “thunderdome” in which parents duke it out to grab seats in exclusive programs and schools, providing quality education only for some.

***Against the failure of liberal integrationism, genuine Marxists stand on the program of revolutionary integrationism.*** The fight is political. So long as teacher unionists (both the bureaucracy and opposition groups) are tied to the Democratic Party, they will – whatever the intention – be promoting police terror, racism, poverty and war. The CSEW calls for a ***class struggle workers party to fight for a workers government***. We insist: real social equality can only be achieved by uprooting the entire system of racist American capitalism. It is crucial that educators be part of the fight for free, quality, secular, integrated public education, from kindergarten through post-graduate; for a free quality public health system serving the entire population (socialized medicine); for full citizenship rights for immigrants, for full democratic rights for gay, lesbian and transgender people. These are all basic democratic rights – but like the struggle for black liberation, for the liberation of women and all the oppressed, they cannot be realized short of a socialist revolution. ■

## Straight Talk About “Privilege” and Oppression

*The writer is a teacher in a New York City public school. She wrote this while a student in a graduate education program.*

Today in my bilingual education class, we discussed privilege and race. During this discussion I explained that this is not a question of privilege, but of oppression, and that this is not the first time in history that words like “oppression” have been replaced by others – nobody wants to talk about *oppression*. I went on to further expand upon troublesome ideas I had found in our class reading. I said:

– that white people, as a whole, do not benefit from black oppression. Rather, the ruling class benefits from the oppression of all by, for example, driving down wages, including those of whites.

– that “privilege” poses the individual as the root of oppression and this conception is historically inaccurate.

We were then asked to explain parts of a reading on *critical consciousness*. I had been tasked with a section on *discomfort* that claimed that “White people, for example, must learn to live with the discomfort of acknowledging their

own unearned privilege.... A pedagogy of discomfort aims to reverse situations like this, so that rather than only marginalized communities feeling discomfort, members of the dominant community share that burden.”<sup>1</sup> The dominant community in the reading is *white people*, whereas Marxists would say dominant *class*, the ruling *class*, the bourgeoisie. And we wouldn’t aim to merely “discomfort” the bourgeoisie, but to expropriate the hell out of them with a workers revolution. This reading made me furious. Having been asked to explain part of it from my perspective, I did just that.

As I was working on this activity alone, the professor came up to me and asked me, “Are you willing to acknowledge *your* privileges? Are you willing to acknowledge your *positionality* in society?” She asked me this several times because, instead of responding in a personal way, I explained:

- that the privilege model goes hand-in-hand with identity politics and American individualism;
- that a privilege approach can result in reactionary backlash;
- that these kinds of conceptions have to do with an individual’s relation to other individuals based on their “positionality” in society – people have to follow a list of rules in order to prove that they are “allies,” otherwise, they’re not;
- that the Painters union local and other unionists in Portland participated in the Pride march with a “Hard Hats for Gay Rights” banner; identity politics would say that if one of these workers did not ask about someone’s gender pronouns, they’d be “anti-trans.”

To this last point, the professor tried to claim that that was a different matter. She then asked yet another question: “Do you have identities? Because if you can’t acknowledge that people have identities, how can you address things?” I responded:

- that people can identify in all sorts of ways if they’d like. Basing your politics on your identity is another question.
- that it *is* important to name things, and that the name here is *oppression*, not privilege.
- that the in-class reading had a real story about a white mother who had insisted that the principal not do the morning announcements in Spanish because it made her feel *uncomfortable*. The author of this text stated that the mother should learn to deal with this *discomfort*. This example is not one of *discomfort*, but of *anti-immigrant racism* that the principal had capitulated to by removing the Spanish announcements. If we want to put names to things, we should do that, and not substitute words, like *discomfort* for *racism*.

I was able to explain my work to the class (everyone did) and expand upon the above ideas.

At the same time, I kept thinking, *what privilege?* As a black woman? As a Latina? Was having been an undocumented immigrant for 20 years a privilege? How about having been homeless and living in a shelter? Or experiencing domestic violence in my home for years? She didn’t know anything about my life, but privilege politics gave her confidence to

insist I had “unearned advantages.” Then I thought, maybe she was talking about my education and ability to articulate a historical materialist analysis of black oppression in the United States. Was education a privilege? Well, no. Education is my right, and I’m not going to “check” that right. I want to fight to ensure that everyone has access to that basic democratic right that is systematically denied to so many because of oppression. That’s why I’m a Marxist, an activist, and educator. With privilege politics, the oppression people experience due to the racist capitalist system is erased and all that matters is your perceived “positionality” in society.

Identity politics focusing on “privilege” is based on the erasure of oppression. There is only the one-up that you, as an individual, have over others. And it can be *any* kind of one-up. This one-up can look like white privilege, male privilege, cis-privilege and can even look like smelling/odor privilege, height (tall people) privilege, short people privilege, right-handed privilege, hair privilege, (Becky with the) good hair privilege, pretty people privilege, extrovert privilege, cognitive/intelligence privilege, and neurotypical privilege. However ridiculous and surreal this sounds, these all exist within the academic liberal sphere of identity politics. You can Google them. (A lot can be found on a website called *Everyday Feminism*.) If everyone has a plethora of privileges, how can anyone be oppressed? Right?

This is also made explicit through the concept of *implicit bias* where everyone is an implicit racist, a sexist, a homophobe, even if they are consciously unaware (that’s where the word *implicit* comes in!). With these politics, every individual is the oppressor, and they need to be trained to stop oppressing, to stop microaggressions. It would even supposedly help to stop police shooting and murdering black people. How so? Well, you see, if the cop who murdered Philando Castile point-blank in 2016 had had implicit bias training, he might have not been so antsy and trigger happy when Castile reached for his wallet to pull out his driver’s license! You think?! This liberal claptrap serves only to cover up the role of the police in the capitalist state. While they push eight-hour implicit bias training for NYPD cops to “promote reconciliation” with black communities, it will take a socialist revolution to put an end to racist cop terror.

Privilege/identity politics is also used to shut down debate, claiming that one can’t talk about any type of oppression if they aren’t walking in those shoes. In other words, let blacks care about blacks, women take care of women, and so on. The less privilege you have, the more you can speak. The more privilege you have, the more you need to keep quiet. In this conversation, real talk about oppression is replaced by, “You have a one-up, so shut up.” To crawl out of that pigeonhole, you’re supposed to reveal something deep/personal about yourself. If you don’t do this, you’re simply not “woke.” As for feminist consciousness-raising through storytelling, it’s all talk and no action.

The fundamental issue is not “positionality,” it’s not all about you personally, it’s about power – class power. To get it we need to raise *class* consciousness and the consciousness of social oppression to the point of revolutionary consciousness, organization and action. ■

<sup>1</sup> From Deborah K. Palmer, et al., “Bilingualism, Biliteracy, Biculturalism, and Critical Consciousness for All,” *Theory Into Practice*, Vol. 58:2 (2019).



# Interview with Vera John-Steiner on Vygotsky and Language, Marxism and Education, Malcolm X, and Other Topics

## Part 2

*The first part of this interview with Vera John-Steiner (1930-2017), a specialist on pioneering Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), was published in Marxism & Education No. 5 (Summer 2018). It is available on the Internet at <http://edworkersunite.blogspot.com/>. The questions of the interviewer, Sándor John, are in italics.*

### Upsurge of Interest in Vygotsky's Ideas

*So, after a period in which Vygotsky's writings had gone into oblivion, been basically forgotten, and in some cases inaccessible, over the past decades there has been a real surge in interest. The other day we were talking about my totally accidental encounter with somebody who published a book called "Vygotsky in Bolivia." I remember that you had been struck by the enormous popularity of Vygotsky in Argentina, particularly not long after the fall of the dictatorship.*

Right.

*Vygotsky is also quite popular in Brazil. What accounts for the recent surge of interest? Much of that interest in the early period seems to have been significantly outside of the U.S.*

Right. I think the fact that Vygotsky's *Thought and Language* was taught as part of a one-year course at Harvard on cognition, and that it was extremely popular both with the students and the instructors, gave it a prestige.

*When was that?*

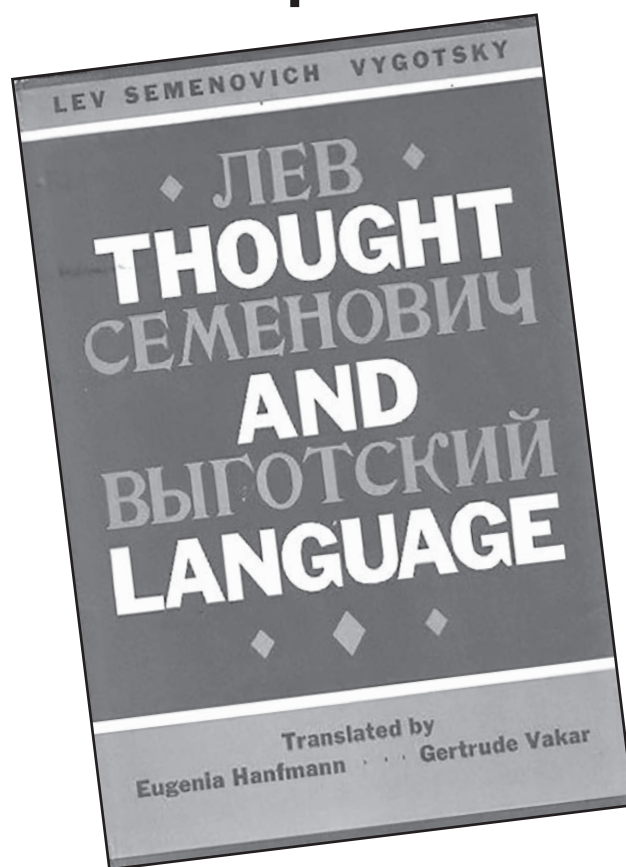
I think 1967.

*That early?*

Yes. Because it was first translated in '62 by two translators who later were criticized, Eugenia Hanfmann and [Gertrude Vakar]. That was before Jerome Bruner went to the International Congress of Psychology which was held in Moscow in the '60s.<sup>1</sup> He met [Soviet neuropsychologist Alexander] Luria then, and Luria said that Vygotsky was one of the major psychologists of the 20th century, and only one of his works is known abroad. That's when Luria gave some of the chapters that appear here to Bruner, who didn't have time to work on it. Then Bruner gave it to Michael Cole, who was going off to field work and [education theorist] Courtney Cazden said to Michael, "Vera has been teaching *Thought and Language* for four years at Yeshiva." I was teaching it as part of my "Thought and Language" course, which used Vygotsky's book as the major textbook.

*I just remember you talking about male Yeshiva students*

<sup>1</sup> The congress referred to here was held in 1966.



*pushing you out of the way to get into the elevator.*

Right, that was part of Yeshiva too. They were pretty physically sexist.

*So then the book sort of opened the way to a rediscovery of Vygotsky's ideas.*

Yes. But in the late '60s, when I gave a conference presentation on Vygotsky, I would have 15 people in the room. In the '80s, there would be hundreds and hundreds of people in the room. And I think that the major difference is that, at a time when there was a very powerful awareness that the society was becoming more and more multicultural and multilingual, they were looking for somebody whose thinking could support the new pedagogies and institutions and understandings that were required; and that meant a psychology that was profoundly cultural and profoundly historical.

*So this is an example of the interaction of knowledge and the social environment.*

Exactly.

*People needed different tools or different techniques and approaches.*

And the traditional distinctions between anthropology, linguistics, sociology and psychology were becoming less pronounced at the same time. So Vygotskian psychologists borrowed methods from sociolinguists which were developmental, and in anthropology a lot of field work [was done] in classrooms, so the researchers got out of their labs and went into the institutions.

*Do you think that these conceptions of learning taking place in a communicative environment went back to some of the experiences of Vygotsky himself in the early Soviet Union?*

To some extent. I think it was modified. I think his theory, his focus, was on small group interaction. And it was expanded to a whole classroom, in the way in which it was used in the West.

*To the whole classroom.*

Right. And the way it was used in South America.

*So in terms of Latin America, if I remember correctly, you had a pretty powerful experience at a congress.*

In Mexico City. This was the first time that the people from Argentina could come.<sup>2</sup> I had a large photographic portrait of Vygotsky in my office at UNM [the University of New Mexico], which I took to the conference. They hung it on the podium from which I spoke. When they took a picture of me, I could be barely seen over the podium, and [they] took it to Vygotsky's daughter in Moscow, who put it on her icebox.

So when I met her – I think it was in 1992 – I didn't speak Russian and she didn't speak English, but through the translator she told me, "I know you." I asked, "How do you know me?" And she said, "You're on my icebox." [Laughs.]

Anyhow, the Argentinians were particularly intensely involved in trying to make these international connections.

*What about Brazil?*

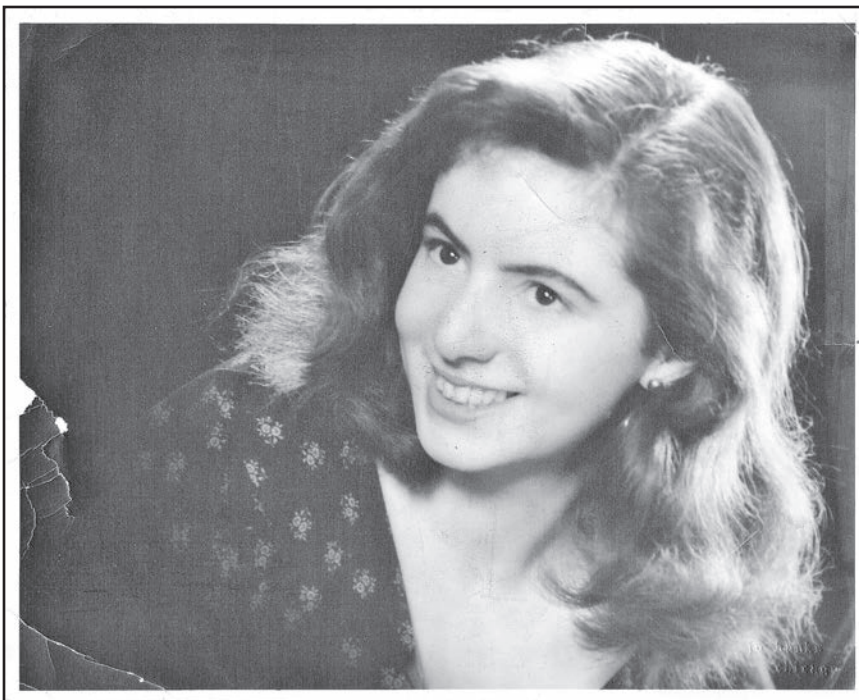
I went to Brazil in '88, the year after Stan died.<sup>3</sup> Right. The Brazilians had a couple of people who already knew about Vygotsky. His work wasn't translated into Portuguese, so they were reading it in English, and some in Russian.

To answer your question: you know that my own interest in psychology came from traumatic historical experiences. I wanted to understand violence, which I have never, still, truly learned to understand.

*You're referring to your own traumatic historical experi-*

<sup>2</sup> Argentina was ruled by a military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Vera's late husband Stan Steiner (1925-1987), a former staff writer for the *Daily Worker* who was the author of *The New Indians; La Raza: The Mexican Americans; Fusang: The Chinese Who Built America; The Islands: The World of the Puerto Ricans; The Waning of the West*, and other books.



Jo Banks

Vera in the late 1940s or early '50s.

*ences, in part?<sup>4</sup>*

Right. I knew that was what I wanted to study. And, perhaps if I had [already had] some psychology, I would have changed my mind, but my *idea* of psychology was that it was going to give me some answers. So, with regard to Latin America, I think that what happened, with the torture and everything else, was that people were looking for a psychologist who had some political beliefs and whom they could try to develop, to answer some of their questions.

*Yes, it's amazing how popular discussion of psychology is in Argentina. There are several weekly psychology magazines on all of the kiosks; cab drivers talk about psychology; one of the first questions that leftists ask you in Argentina is what school of psychology you are affiliated with, even if you don't have any expertise on the question.*

[Laughs.] Wow. Yes, because Lacan is so popular.<sup>5</sup>

*I think it is a deeply traumatized society in very many ways, because of the dictatorship.*

### The Trouble with Chomsky

*I wanted to ask you one or two more theoretical questions, and then a few others. I think for the public in general, the star linguist is still Noam Chomsky, and Noam Chomsky is very popular among –*

Leftists.

*– leftists, and young people who are beginning to get interested in leftist ideas. Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky are probably the two writers that are most commonly the first*

<sup>4</sup> Vera and her younger brother István, together with their parents, were deported to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1944.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), French psychoanalyst and theorist of "philosophical anthropology." His works have been popular among a wide range of Argentine intellectuals.





**Vygotsky with his daughter Gita.**

*leftist things that many young people read. How could you sum up some of the differences between Chomsky's ideas of language acquisition and Vygotsky's ideas?*

Chomsky really is a Cartesian,<sup>6</sup> so he believes in the dichotomy of the mind and the body. Vygotsky is not a dichotomist: he believes in the foundation of the body, on which, with the help of societal resources, we build the human mind.

And this is just a little postscript of mine: part of the long dependence of infants on care for survival provides the context for that kind of sustained, laborious process of acquiring language.

*A postscript of yours meaning something that you have added to this.*

Just the notion of interdependence. If, as Chomsky says, we are born with a wired-in language acquisition device, then you don't need two years to express the simplest utterances; and you don't need the slow, well-documented stages of that process, where a sentence is first expressed as a single word and is expanded. "Milk." "You want mommy to get you some milk?" And that kind of interaction is so widespread, and so basic to child-rearing, that we don't even recognize the critical nature of what that expansion provides for the very, very early learning child.

So, while Chomsky puts all the emphasis on a neurologically built-in system that only needs input to get it going,

<sup>6</sup> "Cartesian" refers to the outlook of French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650); in this case, specifically "the dualism of mind and body."

Vygotsky puts all the emphasis on the social interaction – recognizing that, of course, you need the material, neurological system to build on. That would be, in the simplest way, the major difference. There is a profound contradiction between Chomsky's politics, which are historical, and his linguistic-which is Cartesian. He was an anarchist.

*Supposedly.*

He told me that when he went to Israel he was an anarchist, and that being in a kibbutz kind of made him a little less of an anarchist.

*Because he saw what it was really like?*

[Laughs.] I don't know.

*That's another discussion, I guess, about what his politics are, but I think that he's really a liberal –*

Yeah.

*– and that the liberal idealism is not so inconsistent.*

Right.

*That's another long discussion. Let's go back to some of the things you talked about earlier. You've talked about the importance of Vygotsky's ideas to people who were involved in education and language acquisition studies, and the psychology of education, who were trying to combat racist views. I think also those racist views at that time had a very powerful expression in government policies, like the Moynihan thesis<sup>7</sup> and all of this racist theorizing that I think had very clear instrumental purposes.*

Right.

### **Encounters with W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson and Malcolm X**

*There were also people like Stanley Elkins, who wrote about slavery and racism in a purportedly psychological way, that I think actually fed into this.<sup>8</sup> In any case, one of the things that we talk about a lot in *Class Struggle Education Workers* is that education is a place where race, class and so many other social issues come together.*

Right.

*It is therefore so political. But I wanted to ask you a bit about some of the ways in which these struggles over concepts of language had to do with some of your experiences in the civil rights movement. Part of this is just a way of asking more about some of your own experiences.*

Sure.

*One of the things that people are always fascinated by, when I mention it to them, is that you chaired that meeting with W.E.B. Du Bois. Can you tell us a little bit about that?*

Well, that was pre-Vygotsky.

<sup>7</sup> Sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1927-2003) became Assistant Secretary of Labor under President Lyndon Johnson, and later a Democratic senator from New York. His 1965 report, *The Negro Family*, claimed that poverty among African Americans was related to a high level of single-mother families supposedly caused by destructive aspects of "ghetto culture." After becoming an "urban affairs" advisor to President Richard Nixon, in 1969 Moynihan proposed that the government adopt a policy of "benign neglect" on racial issues.

<sup>8</sup> The U.S. historian Stanley Elkins (1925-2014) was most widely known for his book *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959).



**Madison, Wisconsin, early 1950s: Vera chairing meeting during speech by W.E.B. Du Bois, one of his last before he left the U.S. and moved to Ghana. (When Vera died in December 2017, this photo was on her bulletin board at home.)**

*Before your involvement with Vygotsky?*

Right. It was because I established a Peace Committee at the University of Chicago, and we had a conference in Madison, Wisconsin of the different university-based political organizations dealing with racial injustice.

One of the most effective things that the Chicago committee had was an exhibit of photographs of South African black miners. Because this was so closely linked to the McCarthy era, we were fortunate to have a relatively large group of people. Also, the University of Chicago's location being, as you know, so close to the South Side of Chicago, while other universities are not necessarily that close to a large black community, and that whole sense that you were not to cross the Midway [into the black neighborhood just to the south of campus].

And, as you know, the University of Chicago was the first university in the country that was negotiating a student exchange with Moscow University. So there were a lot of different things that we were doing. But my primary concern was these issues of peace. It was not that far removed from the "Stockholm peace petition" [launched in 1950].

At the conference in Madison, Du Bois spoke. I used to think it was his last public talk in the U.S., but I have learned that it was one of his last ones. He talked about African Ameri-



**Paul Robeson in 1952 at a protest near the U.S.-Canada border.**

can history and its relevance to that time.<sup>9</sup>

*You also told me that you had helped to smuggle Paul Robeson onto the U. of C. campus at one point?*

Yes, we had to make an agreement with the administration that he would not speak, only sing. He was willing to agree to that because he thought that the songs spoke.

*So the Administration insisted that he not speak.*

Right, and of course he chose songs that were maximally political, while the veterans were picketing outside.

*A right-wing veterans' group?*

Right. That's why we had to smuggle him in, because they had blocked all the main entrances.

*And then you got involved with the civil rights movement in Rochester, New York?*

Right. And I sat in, in one of the jails, because some of the civil rights workers who went South, they found a reason to arrest them. Police brutality was particularly intense in Rochester at that time.... The sit-in was part of trying to establish connections between part of the university and the community in order to have an impact on the police – not necessarily a very effective strategy, but it was meant well.

*Was it CORE [Congress of Racial Equality]?*

It was mostly CORE.

<sup>9</sup> An online collection of Du Bois' papers housed at UMass Amherst includes an April 1952 talk at the University of Wisconsin, titled "Academic Freedom." It relates the topic to the history of slavery and racial oppression in the U.S. As this seems to be only item of its kind in the collection, it is highly likely that this is the speech Vera chaired.



*Was it in Rochester that you met Malcolm X?*

I saw him when he addressed the gathering against police brutality in Rochester, and I heard him speak. I was not involved in welcoming him or anything there, but then I met him in a face-to-face, more personal way at Paule Marshall's<sup>10</sup> New Year's Eve party [in New York]. It was the last New Year's Eve party that he ever had.

*What was your impression of him?*

I thought he was the kindest, most considerate, polite person, modest. He was surrounded by UN diplomats.

*Were they mainly from African countries?*

Yes, and his wife was sitting with a group of African women, and every 15 minutes he went over to make sure that she wasn't bored and that she was comfortable, and so on. He was just very impressive.

*I think I have two last questions. One is another question about your own engagement with Vygotsky, because one of the themes that we've been talking about is Vygotsky and Marxism.*

Right.

*How was it that you first got involved with Marxism? I can ask you this now, because for 30 years you were a stateless person and the FBI was threatening to deport you many times, including when I was very little. But now I don't think we have to worry so much about those questions, in your case –*

Right.

*– though we do have to worry about deportations in general very much. So, how did you first get involved with Marxism?*

I was in Geneva, at a fancy school, as a charity case [shortly after WWII], and I was feeling kind of marginalized from all these wealthy Americans and so on, and my hope was that the end of the war meant that we were building a more humane world. But I didn't know how to go about it. And there was a student at the school who was from Yugoslavia, and he was the son of a doctor who went to China who helped the Maoist forces.

*Norman Bethune?*

No, he was Yugoslavian.

*Bethune was Canadian, but he was the most famous. So this was the son of a Yugoslav doctor who had gone to China –*

Right, who must have made connections with Bethune. Anyway, this student announced that he would like to have a discussion on Marxism. And I joined it and Charlotte [Pomerantz] joined it and [her father] Abe sent us some literature from New York, even though he was not an active Marxist.

*You had met Charlotte because you heard her playing the "Internationale" in her room, no?*

Shostakovich, and then the "Internationale" and many different things. Her room was next door to mine. She knew absolutely no French, and seldom came down to eat. I was



**Photo of Charlotte Pomerantz and Carl Marzani, from Vera's bulletin board.**

concerned about this person who was playing great music but never appeared, so I knocked on her door and asked her if I could bring her some food. I guess I must have gestured, or knew enough English to know the word "food."

So Charlotte joined, and then four other people. And then Charlotte left, and this young Yugoslav went back to Yugoslavia, and by that time I knew that there were other groups and I joined a workers' theater group and that's where I got exposed to more Marxism.

*And they smuggled you into France, right?*

Right, where they performed Gorky's *Lower Depths*, in French.

*Just for the tape, Charlotte later married Carl Marzani.<sup>11</sup>*

Right.

*What was the first thing that you read in the study group?*

I think the first thing we read was the Manifesto.

*I believe you told me that Socialism: Utopian and Scientific was another of the things you read first.*

Yes.

*I guess the last question is a very general one. We're changing the name of the CSEW Newsletter to Marxism and Education. Given the importance that you've described, of Vygotsky's ideas and their relation to Marxist concepts, do*

<sup>11</sup> Charlotte Pomerantz (born 1930) is a children's writer and journalist, and was Vera's close friend since the 1940s. Her husband Carl Marzani (1912-1994) was an Italian-born U.S. leftist and author who fought in the Spanish Civil War, both in the International Brigades and in the anarchist Durruti Column. Tried on "loyalty" charges in 1947, with the case going all the way to the Supreme Court, Carl served two years in prison. He later started the leftist publishing company Marzani & Munsell, which brought out the first edition of *Negroes with Guns* by Robert F. Williams; the key labor history book *Labor's Untold Story*; *The Yahoos*, a 1964 exposé of the far right written by Stan Steiner under the pen name Mike Newberry; as well as many books on China, Cuba, the USSR, black history, McCarthyism and other topics, mainly by authors associated with the CP.

<sup>10</sup> Novelist and memoirist Paule Marshall (1929-2019) is the author of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and other works.

*you have any general things to say to people who work in education about whether they should study Marxism and, if so, why?*

I think first and foremost because Marxism provides the notion that humans are changeable. That by being engaged in different struggles, and in different historical periods, they don't have a universal human nature, but that human nature grows and changes with the lives we lead. But one of the most important tasks of education is to prepare us to be willing to change. But right now, what education is trying to do is the contrary, is to try to make us as static as possible. I think this is more important than anything else that you may learn in school, and that is how to learn for change. How to mobilize your own willingness and adventurousness, that most young children have, to build upon that, rather than to lose it.

The second thing is that identity is not a physiological and psychological process. It is built on physiology and psychology; it's built on some of those individual experiences – but identity is co-constructed by members of one's community. Classrooms are run competitively, where children are urged to defeat each other, rather than cooperatively, where they learn how much more they can accomplish when they cooperate with each other. I get from my ex-students wonderful quotes from children who say "I had done this" – this is a music class – "I had done this music exercise with some other children, and I had so many more ideas than I had when I did it alone."

So I think that the discipline that comes with clear objectives not just for oneself but for one's community and future is a very, very different discipline than what's based on punishment.

*Right now there's what is often termed identity politics that, among other things, fractures people into what seem to be identities that they're purportedly born into that then become the essence of who they are and how they relate to other people, including politically. We challenge that and fight against that concept, which is very different from the crucial recognition that capitalist society affects different people differently through different forms of social oppression, probably the oldest of which is women's oppression and then with chattel slavery in the modern world, the development of capitalism, black oppression, and many other forms of oppression.*

*So, when you talk about identity, I think probably some of our readers might assume –*

That I'm talking about identity politics.

*And contrary to identity politics is the concept that you can only unite the struggle against oppression by actively working against every specific form of oppression, but not to then split them up into separate static identities that then fight amongst themselves for priority. I know that you were very involved with the women's movement, which Marjorie, among others who work with our education workers group, were also really*



Jo Banks

**University of Chicago, early 1950s: Vera dancing with a friend.**

*involved in. Do you have any thoughts on that?*

I think that many of the people whom I know who identify themselves as feminists really ignore the different meaning of fighting for women's rights. And it is my experience in the black community, and in the Native American communities, that has given me a sense of how crucial it is to look at culture and gender and history simultaneously, and not to break them up into different journeys. That it takes different forms, different responsibilities within the family, different opportunities for leadership, and I have been very impressed with the number of black women who have become really important figures in our society. It feels, as I have watched this, that in each generation the strength of black women has really increased faster than any other group in our society. I don't really know the exact answer to that, but I think when we look at struggles for women's rights it's very important to try to understand that.

*I actually have one more question. When we were talking earlier you said that one early Soviet figure that you were familiar with is a math educator named Davydov?<sup>12</sup>*

Right. His method was to introduce concepts first and then examples. This did not sweep all the schools but there were and there are schools that follow his method and there has been an American math educator, Jean Schmittau, who compared the students in those schools with students in this country, and based on her studies, the method is very successful.<sup>13</sup>

*Thank you. ■*

<sup>12</sup> Vasily Davydov (1930-1998) led the Psychological Institute of the Russian Academy of Education, and specialized in mathematics education.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Jean Schmittau, "Vygotskian Theory and Mathematics Education," *European Journal of Psychology and Education*, March 2004; and Jean Schmittau and Anne Morris, "The Development of Algebra in the Elementary Mathematics Curriculum of V.V. Davydov," *The Mathematics Educator*, 2004.



## Mobilize Union Power to Defeat Bipartisan Capitalist Attack on Public Education

# The Fight Over Reopening Schools Is a Class Battle

*The following article is reprinted from a Class Struggle Education Workers special supplement, published in September 2020 (see ad page 2) when many in teachers unions called to keep schools closed.*

On July 7 [2020], Donald Trump held a series of White House events to pressure governors, mayors and educational authorities to physically reopen schools this fall after they had shut down across the country in March as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. The next day, backed up by his education secretary Betsy DeVos, Trump threatened to cut off federal funds to any district that defied his demand that all schools must resume in-person classes no matter what. He also slammed the “very tough & expensive guidelines” on school reopening planned by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This came just as COVID-19 cases were shooting up in much of the U.S., passing the 3 million mark, with 128,000 dead. Two months later, double that number have tested positive for the virus and the number of dead has increased by 50%.

The presidential *diktat* to fully open schools everywhere was clearly part of his reelection drive, in order to get the economy rolling by November. Simultaneously, as daily protests against racist police brutality continued in the wake of the cop murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Trump dispatched Homeland Security agents to Portland, Oregon. His aim was to provoke bloodshed against anti-racist demonstrators so he could campaign as the law-and-order candidate cracking down on “anarchists and agitators.” But while Trump’s aim was transparently political, various medical and educational associations issued reports urging that schools be reopened where virus transmission rates are low, in view of the damage to the education, development and well-being of children resulting from keeping them out of school. This particularly affects oppressed racial and ethnic populations subjected to systemic racism in every sphere of U.S. capitalist society.

In response to Trump’s teacher-bashing offensive and fears generated by the pandemic, there has been growing resistance among educators to reopening schools across the U.S., both in regions with high community spread and in areas with much lower rates of infection. With the beginning of the traditional K-12 school year upon us, the issue of what conditions must be met to reopen schools has led to sharp political clashes. In solidly Democratic New York City, after being the epicenter of the pandemic in the spring, virus transmission rates are



Chris Somodevilla/Getty Images

**Donald Trump, enemy of public education, demands that all schools must reopen, even where coronavirus pandemic is raging. But capitalist war on public schools is bipartisan.**

now among the lowest in the U.S. But Mayor Bill de Blasio’s plan to open school-house doors on September 10 come what may, with no preparations for testing and buildings manifestly unsafe, stirred a hornet’s nest of opposition from teachers, administrators and parents.

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT), representing almost 80,000 teachers and 20,000 other NYC Department of Education (D.O.E.) employees, threatened to strike. Class Struggle Education Workers strongly supports the UFT undertaking strike action to ensure that the steps are taken to make the schools safe to reopen and to counter threats of mass layoffs. The UFT tops have long hidden behind New York’s no-strike Taylor Law to avoid calls for militant union action. In the past, when a Class Struggle Education Workers delegate called to prepare to strike, Mulgrew even ordered her words stricken from the record. At present, educators are in the strongest position ever to push through demands for sharply cutting class sizes, improving ventilation systems, and hiring thousands of new teachers, paraprofessionals and custodians. But a real strike requires serious preparation.

In order to rip up the Taylor Law and win a strike, teachers need to mobilize powerful forces that can *defeat recalcitrant city rulers by bringing NYC to a halt*. That means bringing out the powerhouse of city labor, Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100. TWU members stayed on the job throughout the coronavirus crisis, in which 131 NYC transit workers died of COVID-19, in part because of the refusal of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to release personal protective

equipment it had stockpiled for a pandemic. Now they are facing layoffs as MTA bosses threaten 7,000 layoffs and “doomsday” cuts of 40% of subway and bus service. The 2005 transit strike paralyzed NYC, until TWU tops caved after three days due to political pressure and Taylor Law penalties. Today we must stand firm and strike together.

De Blasio has announced a cut of \$700 million in the DOE budget due to falling tax revenues as businesses shut down in the pandemic. His schools chancellor Richard Carranza has said that this would mean layoffs of 9,000 teachers, at a time when many thousands *more* educators are urgently needed. In addition, the mayor threatened as many as 22,000 layoffs of municipal employees. So the UFT should also join forces with other city workers, including the 150,000 members of AFSCME’s District Council 37. In particular, it is urgently necessary to forge strong bonds with students and parents, to wage a common struggle for safe schools. Class Struggle Education Workers has always opposed the mayoral dictatorship over NYC schools, calling for *teacher-student-parent-worker control of the schools*, with educators in the lead.

Mulgrew used the *threat* of a strike as a bargaining chip, to get a few concessions from de Blasio. The UFT tops haven’t a clue about how to wage a real strike. The CSEW calls for a *mass elected strike committee* of delegates from every unit, recallable at any time, to mobilize the membership for class struggle. This is serious business: we’re talking about an all-out joint strike of the UFT, TWU and other municipal workers to force city rulers to cough up the *tens of billions of dollars* it will take to make the schools and subways and buses safe for all. That requires a fighting leadership armed with a *class-struggle program to oust the sellout bureaucrats and break with the Democrats* who run New York for the Wall Street fat cats and real estate moguls they front for. As for the Taylor Law, just remember, *the only “illegal” strike is one that loses*.

### The Need for Reopening Schools

At the time schools across the United States were closed in mid-March, this was a necessary step in order to implement general quarantining of the population to contain community spread of the deadly coronavirus. Shutting down many businesses, combined with “stay-at-home” and “shelter-in-place” orders, did eventually slow transmission rates. However, when the orders were prematurely lifted after a month or two, particularly in the South and West, the stage was set for the summer resurgence of COVID-19. Also, the criminal policy of “flattening the curve” by sending people with symptoms (except the most severe cases) home, in order to not overwhelm the severely cut-back capitalist medical system, spread infection to family members and others. The mostly black, Latino and immigrant “essential workers” were particularly hard-hit.

But the necessary school closures came with a huge cost.



NYC mayor Bill de Blasio with his schools chancellor, Richard Carranza (left) and UFT leader Michael Mulgrew announcing contract agreement in 2018.

A July 10 joint statement by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), National Education Association (NEA) and the school superintendents’ association declared:

“We recognize that children learn best when physically present in the classroom. But children get much more than academics at school. They also learn social and emotional skills at school, get healthy meals and exercise, mental health support and other services that cannot be easily replicated online. Schools also play a critical role in addressing racial and social inequity. Our nation’s response to COVID-19 has laid bare inequities and consequences for children that must be addressed. This pandemic is especially hard on families who rely on school lunches, have children with disabilities, or lack access to Internet or health care.”

At the same time, the joint statement stressed that “schools in areas with high levels of COVID-19 community spread should not be compelled to reopen.” An August 19 [2020] “Guidance for School Re-entry” by the AAP declared that it “*strongly advocates that all policy considerations for the coming school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school*,” but that the “uncontrolled spread” of the virus in much of the U.S. “will not permit in-person learning to be safely accomplished” in many places.

In innumerable ways, lengthy time away from school harms children, even beyond the huge regression in education it entails. This is compounded by the social isolation of being confined to the home, often combined with economic stress when parents have lost their jobs. Hospitals have reported sharp increases in severe sexual and physical abuse of children, as well as suicides. We have seen from our own experiences in online instruction for the New York City Department of Education (D.O.E.) how these pressures can produce severe depression and worse among our students. For undocumented immigrants, closure of schools has meant cutting off an essential lifeline, the only social service they could access while





**“Remote learning” is an oxymoron, and “equitable remote learning” is impossible. Above: Allia Phillips, one of 114,000 homeless students in NYC public schools, with her mother after she picked up iPad from her school in March. But their shelter had no Internet.**

they are denied any form of pandemic assistance, unemployment benefits, stimulus payments, medical care, etc. Masses of working women in particular are forced “back to the home.”

Educationally, online instruction has been a disaster despite the heroic efforts of educators suddenly thrust into entirely different conditions for which they received almost no training and little support. Even when the school system was able to loan iPads to students, many poor families do not have Internet access. For the 114,000 homeless students in New York City schools (out of a total enrollment of 1.1 million), it was worse. Service providers would not install cable connections in shelters, devices would be stolen. The 200,000 special ed students with disabilities were not able to receive crucial speech, occupational and physical therapy. In crowded homes, students were balancing young siblings on their lap, or more than one child had to share a computer. And many students didn’t even log on. In mid-April, 23% of NYC students were not connected, and that’s not counting another 19% who never reported attending at all.

*The Wall Street Journal* (5 June 2020) summed it up: “The Results Are In for Remote Learning: It Didn’t Work.” The article began: “This spring, America took an involuntary crash course in remote learning. With the school year now winding down, the grade from students, teachers, parents and administrators is already in: It was a failure.” Many schools had little “synchronous” instruction (a fancy way of saying that a teacher and students were online simultaneously), while the “asynchronous” consisted of distributing packets of homework. In New York, the Movement of Rank and File Educators” (M.O.R.E.) caucus in the UFT (a coalition of

liberal and reformist currents) and others called for “equity in remote learning.” But even with all the measures proposed (slow down the academics, trauma-informed teaching, etc.), *there is no way online education can be equitable.*

As Internationalist Group and Class Struggle Education Workers signs at an August 3 [2020] protest (called by the M.O.R.E.) stated: “‘Remote Learning’ Widens Racist Gap in Education” and “‘Remote Learning: An Oxymoron. Vygotsky: ‘Education Is Social’.”<sup>1</sup> With online instruction, the tremendous advantages of students from middle-class families who have known computers all their lives, and have (more or less) digital-savvy parents to help out, are greatly increased compared to poor students whose connection to the Internet is at best a smartphone, and usually not a very versatile one. English-language learners all too often find themselves at sea, falling further and further behind with little or no support. But more fundamentally, the idea that schooling consists of simply filling students’ heads with information and academics

is deeply antithetical to public education.

That is, in fact, the “model” – a caricature of education – presented by the privatizing, test-crazed education “reformers” who want to turn educators into reciters of scripted lessons and turn the public school system into a cash cow for vendors, consultants and hedge-fund-backed charter school operators. But as the Soviet developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky wrote in his essay “The Interaction Between Learning and Development”:

“[H]uman learning presupposes a specific social nature and

<sup>1</sup> The work of Soviet developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky on childhood learning is fundamental to modern pedagogy. For more on this foundational theorist see “Interview with Vera John-Steiner on Vygotsky and Language, Marxism and Education, Malcolm X, and Other Topics” in *Marxism & Education* No. 5, Summer 2018. For Part 2 of the interview, see page 37 of this issue.



Waiting for Superman

**Pouring information into students’ heads: Caricature of education from the teacher-bashing propaganda film, *Waiting for Superman* (2010), used by privatizing education “reformers” to promote union-busting charter schools.**

a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them.... [A]n essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers.”

Vygotsky’s concepts are key to educational techniques such as “scaffolding” that are taught in teacher education programs and pedagogical institutes around the world, usually without reference to their underpinning in Marxism (historical materialism). This is doubtless another reason why the capitalist “edureformers” want to do away with teacher education altogether.

For that matter, the privatizers and charterizers consider public education itself a communist plot. After all, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were some of the first to call – in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* – for “Free education for all children in public schools.”

### The Conditions for Reopening Schools

As the novel coronavirus, or SARS-CoV-2, is precisely that, a new strain of potentially deadly virus, much is still unknown about it. What can be said with certainty is that the claim by a Trump campaign video that children are “virtually immune” is false, but also that young children have been far less likely to become seriously ill or die as a result of COVID-19. While children can have high viral loads, there is little evidence of young children as a major source of spread. The situation with teenagers (ages 12-17) is less clear. However, overall, while children under the age of 18 constitute 22.4% of the U.S. population, even after a summer surge of infections, as of August 27 [2020] they account for only 9.5% of the total number testing positive for the coronavirus. Moreover, children 17 and under are only 1.7% of all hospitalizations for COVID-19 and 0.07% of all deaths, a total of 101 in the entire U.S. Nineteen states have had no COVID-related child deaths.<sup>2</sup>

Almost every professional medical body or authority that has studied and reported on the issue has stated that the key determining factor for whether schools can safely open is the rate of infection in the community. Across the U.S., the total number of COVID-19 cases is now over 6 million and the official death toll is up to 188,000. But levels differ greatly from state to state. Contrary to Trump’s demand to resume in-person instruction everywhere, the overwhelming verdict of scientists is that in much of the country, reopening schools is not possible at this time. However, in the Northeast, and New York in particular, the situation is far different, which is why Ashish Jha, director of the Harvard Global Health Institute, tweeted in early August, “Transmission levels so low NY can, with proper precaution, open schools safely.”<sup>3</sup>

From mid-March to mid-May, New York City was the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak in the U.S. Almost 24,000 people have died of COVID-19 here, including confirmed and probable cases, and when you add the number of dead

above the seasonal normal – “excess deaths” – which are quite likely COVID deaths, the death toll is close to 30,000. But the epidemiological curve has dropped sharply, so that today, the average daily number of new cases in NYC amounts to 3.4 per 100,000 people, compared to 11 in Los Angeles or 19 in Houston, Texas.<sup>4</sup> And with over 75,000 tests a day in NYC, the number testing positive for coronavirus has been under 1% for two months, often falling to half that level. That is well below the 3% community positivity rates suggested by many health authorities as a threshold figure for reopening schools.

On the specific situation of New York City, as of August 30, children under the age of 18 make up 3.2% of all reported cases of COVID-19, 1.1% of all hospitalizations, and the number of confirmed and probable deaths of children in NYC since the start of the pandemic (15) amounts to 0.06% (that’s 6 one-hundredths of 1 percent) of the total.<sup>5</sup> In short, the levels of infection today in NYC and most of New England are comparable to that in Germany, and less than half the rate in Italy, France, the Netherlands and other countries that have resumed in-person instruction without major incidents.

There is also the experience of child care centers that were kept open. In NYC, starting in late March, at the height of the pandemic in the heart of the epicenter, some 14,000 children of “essential workers” were cared for in 170 Regional Enrichment Centers. These were staffed by D.O.E. personnel, operated out of public schools and continued into the summer. With social distancing, separate “pods” of 12 or less students per room, mandatory face covering and daily temperature checks, no outbreaks and no clusters were reported (NPR/WNYC, 24 June 2020). Overall, with tens of thousands of programs and over a million children, “between 95 to 99 percent of U.S. child care programs appear to be operating with no outbreaks” (Early Learning Nation, 28 August 2020).

As the controversy over reopening schools heated up this summer, various liberal Democratic websites pointed to the case of Israel where a COVID outbreak of 130 cases at a single school occurred at the beginning of June, two weeks after schools were fully reopened, leading to it and other schools being shut down. This ignores the fact that all of Israel was opened up in mid-May, not just the schools; that in the school in question (the elite Gymnasia Rehavia in Jerusalem, alma mater of several leaders of the right-wing Likud party) students were crowded together, students and teachers removed masks despite prohibitions, and the school was kept open after the first cases were found instead of being quickly shut down. In all, 139 schools and kindergartens were closed, out of 5,200 schools and 200,000 kindergartens in Israel. The rest stayed open.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *New York Times*, 6 September 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Data from NYC Department of Health. A small number of children (about 150) developed a severe condition, “multi-system inflammatory syndrome,” which causes toxic shock, accounting for 5 of the 15 probable and confirmed COVID-19 deaths among children in NYC.

<sup>6</sup> “Anger, frustration as coronavirus rules neglected at Jerusalem school,” *Jerusalem Post*, 31 May; University of Washington Meta-center for Pandemic Preparedness, et al., “Summary of School Re-Opening Models and Implementation Approaches During the COVID 19 Pandemic” (6 July 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Data from American Academy of Pediatrics and Children’s Hospital Association, *Children and COVID-19: State Data Report* (reporting data as of 27 August 2020).

<sup>3</sup> *Gothamist*, 7 August 2020.



Another piece of “evidence” cited by those who want to keep all schools closed was a study posted by the CDC on July 16 [2020] by South Korean researchers on contact tracing.<sup>7</sup> That study showed that children under age 10 have a low rate of spreading the virus, but the media seized on its suggestion that youth ages 10-19 supposedly transmit the virus as much or even more than adults. This went viral on the Internet in scores of articles, setting off alarm bells about school opening. However, a second article, in the *British Journal of Medicine* (7 August 2020), indicated that “additional data from the research team now calls that conclusion into question; it’s not clear who was infecting whom,” as medical correspondent Apoorva Mandavilli wrote in the *New York Times* (15 August 2020). The fact that the initial study was faulty was reported almost nowhere.

In reality, a lot of the debate about opening the schools has been politically driven. Jesse Sharkey, head of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and leader of its Caucus of Rank and File Educators (C.O.R.E.), remarked that tweets from the White House about successful openings in Scandinavian countries did a lot to “undermine the credibility about a safe reopening,” as they were “based on political expediency. And it didn’t help that it was Trump” (*New York Times*, 13 August 2020). In New York City, to a significant degree the fight over reopening the schools is shadow-boxing between keep-them-shut “progressive” Democrats (with pseudo-socialists in tow, as usual) and open-them-up “corporate” Democrats.

Revolutionary Marxists approach the issue from an entirely different, scientific and class-based standpoint. The fact that the racist-in-chief and his education czarina DeVos are calling for opening schools is directly counterposed to everything they have stood for over the past four years, as they have sought to privatize the hell out of the education system. What explains this? They posture as defenders of public education today because they see an opportunity to score electoral points with working-class parents who need the schools open so they can work. These are all squabbles within the framework of bourgeois politics. Rather than the standpoint of those who are using the issue to push “vote-blue-to-stop-Trump” class collaboration, or siding with “progressive” vs. “corporate” Democrats, we are guided by the actual class interests of the exploited and oppressed. Thus, we are for keeping schools closed where infections are high, and to use union power to make the schools safe where they can be opened.

On August 3 [2020], C.O.R.E. in Chicago along with its New York cognate M.O.R.E., the Democratic (Party) Socialists of America and a number of reformist pseudo-socialist groups, called a “National Day of Resistance Against Unsafe School Reopening.” M.O.R.E. called for “No return to in-person school” until there are “no new cases for 14 days.” This seemingly super-cautious demand is in fact deeply reactionary and plays into the hands of enemies of public education, both conservative and liberal. What it translates into is shutting down public schools indefinitely, as there is no prospect of reaching 0 cases of COVID-19 any time in the next months (and quite possibly longer), even where the transmission rate is low, as in New York City today. Moreover, as we have said, M.O.R.E.’s call for “equitable

remote learning” is an unrealizable pipedream, a figment of the imagination of privileged petty-bourgeois liberals and antithetical to genuine education.

*M.O.R.E.’s demand to keep schools closed until there are 0 cases in fact means indefinitely shutting down public education for the 114,000 homeless students, the 155,000 English-language learners, the 220,000 students with disabilities and many if not most of the 800,000 students living in poverty who constitute 70% of the entire student enrollment of the NYC public school system.*

M.O.R.E.’s August 3 demonstration featured coffins, “grim reaper” skeletons, body bags and a mock guillotine labeled D.O.E. Speakers kept chanting “not one more child,” although there have been no reported indications linking COVID-19 child deaths in NYC to infection in school. But if schools should be closed until there are 0 cases of coronavirus infection, what about the flu? Nationwide, 144 school-age children ages 5 to 14 have died of influenza and pneumonia since February 1, *five times* the number (28) who have died of COVID-19. So should all schools be shut down during flu season every year? As for the danger of infection of teachers, close contact with children, who are notorious spreaders of flu viruses (unlike the coronavirus), is definitely an occupational risk. But the mortality rate among D.O.E. employees due to COVID-19 (79 out of 135,000) is less than a quarter of that of the New York City population as a whole.

To be sure, there will be infections, perhaps clusters or an outbreak. Students may have to be sent home and classes, even schools, shut down temporarily. But not to open schools where low infection rates permit will be infinitely more damaging. Willful blindness to that reality also has a class character.

### **“Remote Learning” and the Capitalist Offensive Against Public Education**

It is no accident that the anti-union charlatans of the World Socialist Web Site (a/k/a, the Socialist Equality Party), which has now cooked up a phantom “Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee,” also call to shut down the schools until COVID-19 is no more. It dismisses any UFT strike to ensure that safety standards are met, while blowing smoke about a mythical “nationwide general strike to stop the deadly reopening of schools.” Dressed up in fake-leftist verbiage, this call to keep the schools closed everywhere, not only where infection levels are high but also specifically in New York City, fits right in with the plans of bourgeois politicians to slash spending on public education by making it all remote. Once they have established that it’s not necessary to have a teacher in the room, they can follow up with scripted tele-lessons.

Last May, NY governor Andrew Cuomo asked, in one of his daily corona-briefings, “all these buildings, all these physical classrooms – why, with all the technology that you have?” This was his lead-in to calling to use the pandemic to “reinvent” New York education, saying “it’s not just about reopening schools.” To “reimagine education,” Cuomo announced a committee to be led by Microsoft mogul Bill Gates. A parallel “blue-ribbon” commission to “reimagine New York” is to be headed by Eric Schmidt, CEO of Alphabet, the par-

<sup>7</sup> [https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/10/20-1315\\_article](https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/10/20-1315_article).

ent company of Google. Schmidt said he would be “focused on telehealth, remote learning, and broadband.” Conveniently, such high-tech initiatives would spell billions for Microsoft and Google, while cutting the cost for teachers and school buildings, for doctors and nurses and hospitals. For the bourgeoisie, this is a time to jump on opportunities to “not let a good crisis go to waste.”

Naomi Klein, the left-liberal author of books about how capitalist politicians use disasters to ram through “reforms” which they would otherwise not be able to get away with, termed Cuomo’s vision a “Pandemic Shock Doctrine.” Writing in *The Intercept* (8 May 2020), she noted how Schmidt has been pitching this scheme for some time from his positions as chair of the Pentagon’s Defense Innovation Board and chair of the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence. His aim: to gear up U.S. imperialism for a high-tech war on China.<sup>8</sup> Klein cited an op-ed by Schmidt in the *Wall Street Journal* (27 March 2020) where he wrote:

“We should also accelerate the trend toward remote learning, which is being tested today as never before. Online, there is

<sup>8</sup> China was uniquely able to contain the coronavirus and limit the terrible toll in human lives precisely because its collectivized economy enabled it to massively mobilize the country’s resources to combat this modern plague (see “A Tale of Two Cities: Wuhan – New York,” *The Internationalist* No. 59, May-June 2020). Yet most of the left joins the imperialist war drive by falsely labeling China “capitalist” (see “Defend China Against Imperialist Threats and Trade War! U.S. Response to Coronavirus: China-Bashing and War Moves,” *The Internationalist* No. 59).



Andrew Kelly / Reuters; Alex Wong / Getty Images; Kuhlmann / Munich Security Conference

**NY governor Andrew Cuomo (left) appointed commissions to “reimagine New York,” headed by Eric Schmidt (center), head of Google parent company Alphabet, and to “reimagine” education, headed by Microsoft founder Bill Gates (right). They all want to promote “remote learning,” cutting costs for teachers and school buildings and preparing for high-tech war with China.**

no requirement of proximity, which allows students to get instruction from the best teachers, no matter what school district they reside in....

“If we are to build a future economy and education system based on tele-everything, we need a fully connected population and ultrafast infrastructure. The government must make a massive investment – perhaps as part of a stimulus package – to convert the nation’s digital infrastructure to cloud-based platforms and link them with a 5G network.”

Klein concluded that in the “manufactured austerity crisis” that is now upon us, “The price tag for all the shiny gadgets will be mass teacher layoffs and hospital closures.”

But while she analyzes the threat accurately enough, Klein’s alternative to what she calls the “Screen New Deal” is the “Green New Deal” of Democratic “progressives” Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. They all act as if it’s a question of budget priorities, of where trillions of “stimulus” dollars are to be spent. This is also the line of the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy, whose answer to threatened draconian budget cuts is to pressure Congress to pass the Democrats’ “HEROES Act” for more federal money for the states. They accept the limits of a “manufactured austerity crisis.” In reality, it’s about class interests, and all wings of the capitalist rulers – Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals – have for years been trying to “reform” public education by gutting it and privatizing it, as Cuomo, Gates and Schmidt want to do today.

From the standpoint of the burning needs of the working class, what’s needed is to bring out the power of labor together with all the oppressed, in this time of coronavirus when teachers have an unprecedented opening to push through longstanding demands for quality education which are now key to safely reopening the schools. It is vital that this be done where it can be now, in New York City, setting an example to be followed elsewhere. But that requires a revolutionary leadership that breaks with all parties and politicians of the ruling class to wage a *class* offensive. Capital is using this crisis to impose its reactionary agenda, getting ready to axe tens of thousands of jobs and ratchet up the rate of exploitation. Class-conscious workers must organize to defeat this capitalist assault and undertake a proletarian counteroffensive leading to a workers government. ■

Eduardo Munoz / Reuters



**M.O.R.E. protest, 3 August 2020, called to keep schools closed until 0 infections of COVID-19, playing into the hands of reactionary forces who want to replace public schools (and teachers) with remote instruction.**



# Diary of a Mad Teacher

## (Adventures in D.O.E. Land)

*As schools reopened in the fall of 2020 after being closed in the spring, teachers and students faced chaotic conditions, flipping between remote and in-person classes. CSEW asked supporters teaching in New York City schools to chronicle their experiences.*

### I. Late September 2020

#### PPE and the D.O.E. – Testing? Fuggedaboutit

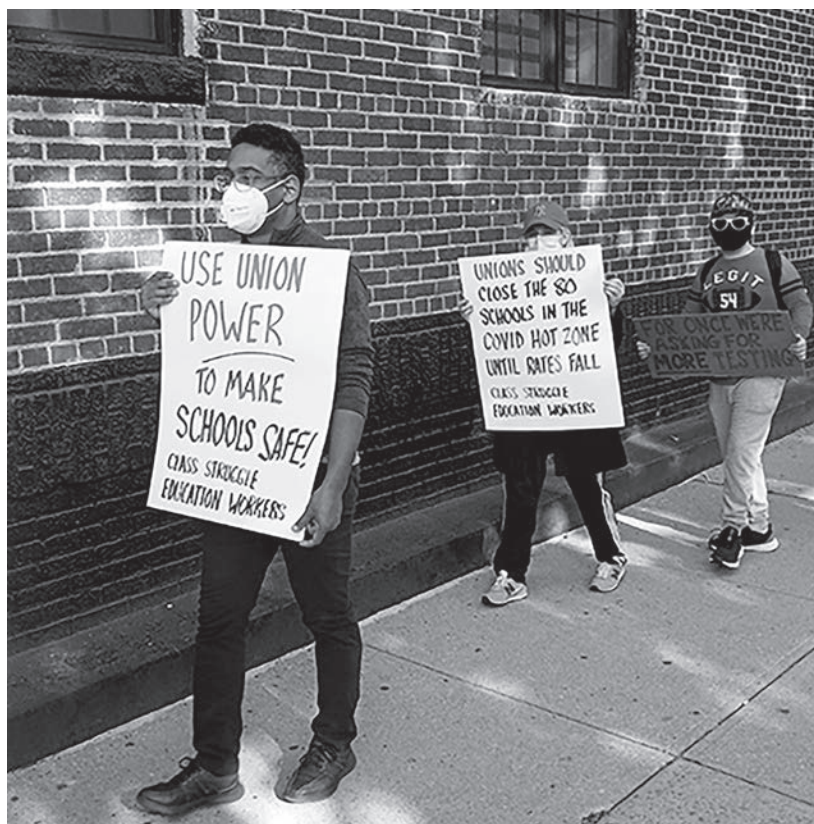
##### A High School in Brooklyn

Welcome back! When teachers returned to the building on September 8th, there was no temperature check or health screening required to enter the building. Immediately, we noticed that the air conditioning for the whole building was shut off and that the power was down. Teachers went around from room to room to check if vents were working by using a piece of paper. Some classes did not have functioning vents. We are in a building that is currently being renovated. Scaffolding encases the building and greatly affects the airflow and increases the amount of debris that comes through our windows. Our windows only open up 4 1/2 inches and are not sufficient for creating a good airflow even with classroom doors open.

We also looked to see if there was PPE in our rooms and on our floor. None was to be found. By the end of the day, the head custodian had been around to point out where the vents were located (most are behind classroom doors) and provide cleaning supplies and PPE. This calmed our nerves somewhat.

Over the next couple of days, we completed professional development activities and team planning via Zoom or Google Meets while all being in the building except for those that were already granted the accommodation to work remotely. Scheduling teachers for classes was an impossible jigsaw given the many factors. Some departments had more fully remote teachers than others, some teachers transferred to other schools or retired over the summer, and the percentage of students requesting fully remote was changing each day. Also, to create a blended class a second teacher needs to be assigned to the same class to work with remote students on days they do not attend in-person learning. But by the end of the first week back, teachers had something that resembled a schedule.

On September 16, students were asked to attend a school-wide online orientation. There were many issues in setting up this large virtual meeting. During the orientation, students



**Class Struggle Education Workers called for unions to use their power, in areas where COVID-19 infection rates are low, to reopen schools safely with billions to triple the number of classrooms, hiring thousands of new teachers and fixing ventilation issues.**

wrote inappropriate messages in the chat, they were confused by all the information, many did not know what group they were scheduled to be in on in-person days, and so on.

On the days leading up to the orientation, the chapter leaders from the three high schools in the building began to express concern about in-person learning. They decided that it would be more powerful and effective if the schools unified to improve the conditions of the school and to demand remote only. Beginning on September 17, teachers began to protest outside the school. Morning protests were better attended than afternoons because teachers do not have childcare.

We are now in week 2 of remote learning. Several students are still not connected with their classes. Teachers and other school personnel will be conducting outreach to get these students online. Meanwhile, if we look at class rosters from today, there are numerous changes to teacher and student schedules. Teachers don't know who their students are and students don't know if they are in the correct class. These issues arise during the regular school year but are tremendously more difficult to communicate and correct while remote. I still do not have a complete teaching

schedule and students are still being added to my classes.

This week teachers are going to get into the curriculum and the work being assigned will impact student grades. When all students are finally in the right classes, there will be many students left behind. Everything is chaotic and we have been given an impossible task. Teachers are still being programmed for fully remote classes and blended classes without a second teacher. What is going to happen when blended learning begins on October 1 if teachers are expected to cover both remote and in-person?

## Hi-Tech, Lo-Tech ... or No Tech

### Another High School in Brooklyn

There was complete organizational mayhem in the school when I arrived. Schools were set to open on September 21, but teachers had no programs until the tail end of the prior week. There was a slew of PDs (professional development sessions) and it was apparent that many teachers had significant difficulty with technology. The DOE, apparently, wants to more closely monitor communication between teachers and students, so all students had to access new [nycstudents.gov](http://nycstudents.gov) emails. School emails were no longer approved for usage and teachers had to transfer massive numbers of online files from their school accounts to the DOE accounts. Teachers were very nervous about this because they and students were already comfortable with their school accounts, and now students had to register for new email accounts to get notifications.

And the tech issues! Students who received devices from the school in the Spring no longer had Internet on them, and were extremely confused about the process to get it back. This is especially true for many immigrant parents and students who could use in-person assistance with the devices, but the school is not accepting in-person technology assistance meetings at the time. ("Today is not your day. Tomorrow isn't looking good either.") Ironically, parents and students need to go to a Google Meet link to ask for advice, but if they have no Internet, well... This has been a major issue. I have about 30 students in one class and only three of them showed up today online despite the fact that I'd spoken with all their parents. The parents are not negligent. They are worried and eager to speak with someone about getting Internet service and working devices, but the bureaucracy you have to cut through!

The week before the 21st we were supposed to contact our period 3 students to ask about their tech and to get them on Google Classroom. This didn't really happen because either students were constantly getting changed in and out of classes, or simply did not appear on Skedula. I didn't know who my students were for some periods until midweek. Student names for my other periods slowly trickled in onto Skedula throughout the week. Today, student schedules are still changing. You need to keep one eye on the ever-changing roster: some students previously added to our Google Classroom need to be removed and new names added.

And then there is "synchronous" and "asynchronous" instruction. At first it was synchronous only, 20 minutes live instruction at the beginning of the class. Then, of course, because

of a lack of teachers, asynchronous instruction was allowed. Because of this, substitutes are no longer needed for remote subbing, only in-person subbing. Teachers must leave lessons for students for the days they are asynchronous. And what can you do in 20 minutes? You certainly can't teach a lesson *and* engage with students. Many teachers are trying to cram a 45-minute lesson into that time slot, speeding through the lessons.

There's no real learning happening. The students know it. The teachers know it. But it looks nice on paper (nice Google slides, nice lesson plan, etc.). The students have complained incessantly that they are not learning and they are right.

The week before the 21st, it was announced that for students in blended learning, their in-person instruction days would not be in the classroom but instead reporting to the auditorium, gyms, and cafeterias. Basically, students would learn remotely from inside the school building either on their phones, laptops, or iPads, which makes no sense. Teachers would be in the classrooms teaching their students in the auditoriums. In the classrooms, there are two and sometimes three teachers conducting class, and when teachers are speaking loudly it is extremely difficult to teach. I don't know how the students would even do this from the gyms when a student on their left is in social studies and another on their right is in math. I can't even imagine the feedback this would cause if students unmuted to speak.

## II. Mid-October 2020

### Proof Is in the Podding

#### A High School in Brooklyn

My high school agreed to a podding system as part of their safety plan for the school reopening. Podding allows students to stay in the same classroom all day with the same group of students in order to minimize contact with others in the building and help with the tracing of positive COVID cases. Having students remain in the same classroom, means that teachers need to travel from class to class.

Since the start of in-person learning, teachers have not observed a functional podding system. In fact, students are moving from class to class and there is no evidence that there are any two students with identical schedules. Some teachers believe that at this point in the school year, we need to do away with the pod system to allow teachers to return to their classrooms, allow student movement, to schedule programs properly.

The pod system does not work at the high school level. Most students have unique needs and requirements to fulfill. The superintendent doesn't seem to understand this and has mandated the programmer to change students' schedules to get them in pods. This mandate has become the number one priority at my school. Meanwhile, ELLs (English Language Learners) are in sections where they are not getting the support they need. I fear that many will go all year without the necessary support.

The return to school has been completely disastrous and chaotic. There has been so much time and effort spent on creating a system that could never work due to a number of



foreseen factors. It seems that in every conversation with my colleagues, the main issue is staffing. There are not enough teachers to cover remote and in-person classes. I've heard of many disturbing scenarios that reveal that education during the pandemic is a farce. While there have been some positive stories, there is no justification for the outrageous number of injustices our students, teachers, and communities are facing.

Teachers are delivering lessons online from their classrooms as their in-person students listen in on their computers. Students are showing up to school expecting to get support from their teachers but are put in the classroom where they are being looked after by a substitute teacher while they are online with their teacher working from home. There are still a substantial number of students in need of learning devices and Internet. One service provider was offering free wi-fi to students in need since the start of the pandemic but not all students live in areas where this service is provided.

Students were excited at the thought of returning to school and being able to socialize with their peers after months of isolation. Instead, they are returning to classrooms where sometimes the teachers outnumber the students or a classroom without a teacher. Once students realized that the return to school was anything but normal, many decided to fill out the remote-only form. Still, there are a number of students that are scheduled for in-person learning but never show up on their assigned day.

Parents and families debated whether or not to keep their children home. They were informed that remote learning would mean that students would still have many of the same benefits of attending in-person classes. This included having a teacher meet with students at a regularly scheduled time. The reality is far from what was promised. Students are getting regular assignments on Google Classroom but do not meet with teachers because teachers have been scheduled to conduct in-person classes. This means that a remote class of 34 or more students misses out while a handful of in-person students get the "real" (or not so "real") deal.

We are now in the middle of October and students and teacher schedules are still being worked out. Next week teachers are supposed to input a progress grade. How are we grading students this school year? Last year, administrators were not shy about being flexible and lenient. So far, administrators are silent and teachers are inputting actual grades. The beginning of a semester is always difficult. This school year presents so many obstacles. How can we fail a student who doesn't have access to a learning device or whose family didn't want to risk sending their child back to school? Even if the child is in school for 1-2 days out of the week, the rest is remote.

## **Staffing Snafu (Systems Normal, All F---ed Up)**

### **A Middle School in the Bronx**

Even before in-person school started there were issues that we knew were not going to be quickly resolved, particularly staffing and space. At first, many of the students were opting for hybrid but by late September about half of our students were

in remote. There are students that are living in other states and countries doing remote classes. There are families that have switched students from hybrid to remote back to hybrid in a matter of days. Even before the pandemic, my school had to hire a number of teachers for either middle school grades. Now we need even more. Some staff members are remote, raising issues of compliance in terms of students with IEPs.

The chaos is staggering. Before in-person classes started there were teachers that had to teach their remote classes in the hallway. At this point with more than half the students being remote, a number of the classrooms are standing empty. You have remote special ed teachers working with in-person content teachers. You have teachers giving classes out of their teaching license area. English and math teachers are bridging two grades. Others are teaching across grades as well, because we don't have enough teachers. So if someone were to get sick, then the school would have to close and everyone would have to quarantine themselves, instead of the pod or cohort just quarantining for two weeks because one teacher can come into contact with half the school.

The UFT said that any student that refuses to do a COVID test will have to go remote. Before school started, we had established that sick children will not be allowed to come to school and will have to be sent back home or to the nurse's office. Yet there were students that were visibly sick in class after more than half the day has passed. Students that were absent because they were sick were able to come back to school, no questions asked.

In addition, some of the remote classes exceed 40 students, when the limit is 30. Many hybrid students only get instruction on their in-person days and are asynchronous (no teacher online) on their remote days. Most of them are not doing any work and have no support on those asynchronous days, and some are trying to sneak into the live instruction for the completely remote classes. There is more: paras doing hallway duty and secretarial work, out-of-compliance class sizes for in-person and remote. Yet despite all the things that need to be resolved we had to do bulletin boards in the hallway by the end of the week.

Today there was a fire drill, and we were notified by email seven minutes before it would happen. So if you're teaching a remote class, what are you supposed to do? No answer. I just followed the fire drill procedure while still talking to my students on my laptop. Other teachers had switched to using their cellphones. One teacher said that when the alarm went off, students in her remote class got scared and thought that there was an emergency happening at the school.

A majority of the students are happy to be in school. Many of them expressed that they are glad to be away from home and not have to take care of their siblings and want the random testing to begin so that they can be tested. Their favorite class as always is gym because they can go to the park outside. With the weather getting colder and all the windows open, students are visibly shivering in the classroom. We are considering getting blankets through DonorsChoose, or just bulk-buying them, so students will not be cold in class. ■

# “Zoom Schools” Are Not Education: Welcome to Google Hell

FEBRUARY 2021 – If you want to know why “remote learning” is an oxymoron, you can start with the riotous confusion of platforms...

Since last March, thousands of NYC teachers have been thrown into tech chaos as Google Classroom took the helm for online learning. In 2017, “more than half the nation’s primary- and secondary-school students – more than 30 million children” used Google Classroom and Google Chromebooks to some extent.<sup>1</sup> Today, an overwhelming number of teachers are learning to navigate this virtual platform – and it ain’t easy. Although some of the more tech savvy may assume it’s a just a simple click here and there (and, *voila!*, you’ve posted an assignment), the fact is that teachers with 20-30 years’ worth of experience under their belts are undergoing tremendous stress as they learn to reconceptualize their entire pedagogy through a massive tech retraining. You can’t just transfer in-person materials online, it doesn’t work that way.

After the on-off-on again experience with Zoom in the spring, Google Classroom is now the standard, and can be difficult to navigate. First, there’s the Stream for posting daily announcements, and where students have access to the Google Meet link (which needs to be activated and made visible by the teacher to students under the settings). However, if students are using iPads, which many are, the Google Meet links on the banners are not visible and difficult to find... So, teachers must also consider how Google Classroom appears and functions on multiple devices (laptops, iPhones, androids, iPads). Then there’s the Classwork tab, where all the materials, assignments, and topics are posted. Teachers need to create new assignments, insert rubrics, add documents (like Google Slides, Google Docs or PowerPoints) and remember to choose an option for students to edit, view, or create individual copies for each student, insert video/web links, etc. and schedule assignments.

Teachers generally grade all posted assignments using the Google Classroom gradebook, as it’s most convenient for students because that’s where all work is centralized. But if there is no feature to import grades from Google Classroom to Skedula/IO Classroom, the semi-official gradebook, teachers would need to manually re-insert grades. For middle and high school teachers, we’re talking about grades for about 125-170 students, in two gradebooks. Now, there are three general categories which go toward report card grades: formative assessments, summative assessments, and participation. Students might get ten or so grades for formative assessments on homework and classwork; summative assessments, perhaps two times per marking period; and participation grades, depending on how the school calculates them (daily, weekly, bi-weekly), could run into double digits. So do the math: in a typical marking period, unless they have a program like Jupiter to automatically sync Google Classroom grades, teachers could

be manually inputting several thousand grades.

Then, of course, there is the People tab, where student emails must be manually added. And if your roster changes, teachers need to be on the lookout on official roster sites, like IO Classroom, to invite them.

On top of all this, administrators are added to Google Classroom as ‘teachers,’ where they can keep tabs on teacher materials and assignments and join Google Meet and Zoom calls at will. And since Google Meet does not allow teachers to view both the chat/participants and their shared screen at the same time (like Zoom does), administrator presence may go unnoticed. Teachers would need a dual monitor or to split their screens. As student attendance plummets, administrators are pushing for more and more student engagement. In the time of coronavirus, this means more interactive tech tools and more for teachers to navigate. Features like Google Meet and Zoom polls and breakout rooms are heavily emphasized in department meetings and many teachers are struggling to meet the demand for more and more tech use.

The social component of education has been removed. Teachers can no longer rely on tried and true in-person formative assessments (confused faces or aha! moments). Tools like Peardeck (a Google Slides extension) and Nearpod make lessons interactive, but the learning curve can be steep and intimidating (adding polls, multiple choice, draggable, or short answer questions), and getting students logged on can take 15 minutes. The list continues: Kahoot (a game-based learning platform that can be used live or assigned/synced with Google Classroom); Kami (a Google extension for writing on PDFs); Book Creator (a website where teachers can build their own interactive classroom libraries); Adobe Spark (a video creating platform); Flipgrid (which models a social media design allowing students to record and comment on each other’s videos in response to teacher prompts); Actively Learn (interactive reading and real time teacher tracking); iReady (math and reading assessments); Padlet (word walls); EdPuzzle (add questions, notes, short answer questions to videos); Jamboard (interactive activities where students can draw, add sticky notes, insert images, text, etc.) ... the list goes on. There is also a litter of websites teachers use to access material, like Scholastic magazine, NewsELA, Easy English News, Khan Academy, Brainpop, Flowcabulary, etc.

The demand for student engagement is so high, some schools have opted for GoGuardian, a software tool downloaded onto school devices (popularly Google Chromebooks) that allows teachers and administrators to view student screens and search history. It’s contradictory: on the one hand, teachers can monitor student work, help those experiencing tech difficulty by opening assignments on student screens

*continued on page 55*



# Google + D.O.E. + de Blasio & Cuomo = Capitalist CHAOS

FEBRUARY 2021 – It is difficult to convey the extent of the disarray that has engulfed NYC public schools, with constantly changing protocols (like the back-and-forth over whether parental consent for COVID-19 testing is required for students to enter the schools); shifting plans on remote classes (how much to be “synchronous” rather than “asynchronous,” where there is no teacher present at all, even on-screen); schools opening and closing, often on a day’s notice; plans for 100,000 daycare slots for working parents reduced to 28,000, and no after-school care, etc. Parents can’t make work plans, mothers in particular have lost their jobs in order to stay home with children. Facing all this, parents’ justified distrust of Mayor de Blasio, Schools Chancellor Carranza and the Department of Education (D.O.E.) – as well as the limited hours of in-person classes and the need for stability – is one of the main reasons why the number of students opting for fully remote instruction shot up from one-quarter in early August to three-quarters by November.

*Reopening schools for in-person instruction for all NYC public school students with drastically reduced class sizes, vastly improved ventilation and sanitation, and systematic testing would have been perfectly possible, with careful planning and billions of dollars.* They had months to prepare. Instead, they tried to run three different systems (in-person, “hybrid” and remote) simultaneously. The predictable result: none of them worked. They couldn’t have, even if COVID infections hadn’t spiked in a second wave. We have chronicled some of the ensuing chaos under the rubric “Diary of a Mad Teacher (Adventures in D.O.E. Land)” on page 49 of this issue. From a teacher in a Brooklyn high school:

“There was complete organizational mayhem in the school when I arrived. Schools were set to open on September 21, but teachers had no programs until the tail end of the prior week. There was a slew of PDs (professional development sessions) and it was apparent that many teachers had significant difficulty with technology. The D.O.E., apparently, wants to more closely monitor communication between teachers and students, so all students had to access new nycstudents.gov emails....

“And the tech issues! Students who received devices from the school in the Spring no longer had Internet on them, and were extremely confused about the process to get it back. This is especially true for many immigrant parents and students who could use in-person assistance with the devices, but the school is not accepting in-person technology assistance meetings at the time....

“There’s no real learning happening. The students know it. The teachers know it. But it looks nice on paper (nice Google slides, nice lesson plan, etc.). The students have complained incessantly that they are not learning and they are right.”

Both for remote and “blended” classes, the bewildering array of platforms, and problems logging on and switching



from one to another, are a labyrinth. Here’s from another posting on the CSEW site, “‘Zoom School’ Is Not Education: Welcome to Google Hell”:

“After the on-off-on again experience with Zoom in the spring, Google Classroom is now the standard, and can be difficult to navigate. First, there’s the Stream for posting daily announcements, and where students have access to the Google Meet link (which needs to be activated and made visible by the teacher to students under the settings). However, if students are using iPads, which many are, the Google Meet links on the banners are not visible and difficult to find.... So, teachers must also consider how Google Classroom appears and functions on multiple devices (laptops, iPhones, androids, iPads).”

Under the Classwork tab, new assignments, rubrics and documents are to be added (like Google Slides, Google Docs, Powerpoint). And teachers have to keep up on any changes in their roster, on IO Classroom (formerly Skedula).

“On top of all this, administrators are added to Google Classroom as ‘teachers,’ where they can keep tabs on teacher materials and assignments and join Google Meet and Zoom calls at will. And since Google Meet does not allow teachers to view both the chat/participants and their shared screen at the same time

(like Zoom does), administrator presence may go unnoticed.” So much for union rules limiting administrators’ observations!

Trying to get students engaged involves using tools such as Peardeck (a Google Slides extension), Nearpod, Kahoot, Book Creator, Adobe Spark, Flipgrid, Actively Learn, iReady, Padlet, EdPuzzle, Jamboard, the list goes on. But the learning curve is steep, and it can take 15 minutes just to get students logged in. Moreover, “The demand for student engagement is so high, some schools have opted for GoGuardian, a software tool downloaded onto school devices (popularly Google Chromebooks) that allows teachers and administrators to view student screens and search history.... [T]his presents a serious privacy issue for families given that administrators and teachers can track student browser history, even outside school hours.... Administrators can even use GoGuardian to monitor teachers without their ever knowing. No need to join the Google Meet or Zoom call as a participant, just log onto GoGuardian spyware.”

Meanwhile, “Students are feeling the full weight of remote learning. At many schools, students have up to seven classes in a row ... if they could even manage to log on to all of them. Lack of access to stable internet connection and devices (many students are using their phones to attend synchronous classes and submit work, or are sharing devices with siblings), navigating new student email account registration, re-booting iPads and other devices from the previous year that lost internet connection over the summer, joining multiple Google Classrooms with various links and codes, and dealing with endless changes in schedules, plus working out tough decisions with their families to go blended or fully remote... students have it rough.” And then there’s grading, a.k.a. “The Joys of Skedula”:

“Teachers generally grade all posted assignments using the Google Classroom gradebook, as it’s most convenient for students because that’s where all work is centralized. But if there is no feature to import grades from Google Classroom to Skedula/IO Classroom, the semi-official gradebook, teachers would need to manually re-insert grades. For middle and high school teachers, we’re talking about grades for about 125-170 students, in two gradebooks. Now, there are three general categories which go toward report card grades: formative assessments, summative assessments, and participation. Students might get ten or so grades for formative assessments on homework and classwork; summative assessments, perhaps two times per marking period; and participation grades, depending on how the school calculates them (daily, weekly, bi-weekly), could run into double digits. So do the math: in a typical marking period, unless they have a program like Jupiter to automatically sync Google Classroom grades, teachers could be manually inputting several thousand grades.”

Did your eyes glaze over? That’s what teachers and students are facing in this helter-skelter “system.” Whether fully remote or hybrid/blended, it’s a torture chamber for all concerned.

Underlying the chaos is the fact that the NYC school reopening was designed by people who are clueless about the actual process of education. Since Republican mayor Michael Bloomberg, New York City schools have been a playground for consultants, Big Data freaks and corporate education “reformers” who want to run public education as a business

(and siphon off juicy profits). After pushing through a law for mayoral control of the schools in 2002,<sup>1</sup> with the connivance of the UFT tops led by Randi Weingarten, Bloomberg’s watchword was “no vendor left behind.” Under Democrat de Blasio, the same practices continue. Thus, last spring the city issued a \$1.2 million contract, described in a D.O.E. statement<sup>2</sup> as “project management support for crisis response priorities and mapping out the planning for resuming school in school buildings,” awarded to Accenture LLP, along with its \$1.7 million annual consultancy contract.

So if you’re wondering how such a screwed-up plan could ever have been devised, start with the fact that it was “mapped out” by the world’s largest business management consulting firm, with 500,000 employees globally. Accenture boasts that it has “decades of experience in higher education,” but judging from its education blog, none in K-12 education, which is an entirely different world. A second factor would be the management style of de Blasio, who notoriously waits til the last minute to make decisions and “sees himself as a policy wonk who is not into the ‘nitty-gritty of being a manager’,” according to a Democratic political consultant.<sup>3</sup> A third factor is the constant feuding between the mayor and governor. But they are just capitalist politicians, what are they supposed to know about education? The reality is that, while there may have been complaints, no one in the D.O.E. upper echelons insisted that this messed-up system can’t work.

This is the result of mayoral control of the schools. As Leonie Haimson of the advocacy group Class Size Matters stated in prepared testimony to the NY State Assembly, “Under Mayor Bloomberg, the ARIS school data system cost more than \$100 million, was rarely used, and was eliminated in 2014. The special education data system called SESIS cost more than \$130 million and is so dysfunctional it is now being replaced by another system.” Under Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio, the expenditure for the D.O.E. bureaucracy in the central and borough offices has ballooned from \$489 million in 2014 to a projected \$734 billion in 2020. He created a new layer of nine “executive superintendents” to oversee the 31 district superintendents. Altogether, the NYC Department of Education has 1,189 educrats making from \$125,000 to

<sup>1</sup> Traditionally in the United States, since the 19th century public schools have been governed by school boards, mostly elected in municipalities or counties. However, in New York City, from the very beginning in 1902, a Board of Education was appointed by the mayor. After the battle over community control in the late 1960s, 33 school districts were formed with elected boards, while the Board of Education was appointed by the mayor and borough presidents. Amid complaints over the notoriously dysfunctional BOE and allegations of corruption against district boards, in 2002, Bloomberg pushed through a state law giving the mayor exclusive control over the schools through the Department of Education. See “No to Mayoral Dictatorship Over the Schools!” (February 2009) and “Enough of Billionaire Mayor’s Control” (November 2010) at the CSEW web site, <http://edworkersunite.blogspot.com>.

<sup>2</sup> *New York Post*, 18 April 2020. That’s on top of a \$1.66 million annual contract for “management consulting.”

<sup>3</sup> “How N.Y.C.’s Mayor Ignored Warnings and Mishandled Reopening Schools,” *New York Times*, 19 September 2020.



\$262,000 a year.<sup>4</sup> But the top levels are mainly managers with little experience in education.

Under the old Board of Education, the upper levels of the school bureaucracy were mainly filled by former teachers who climbed up the ladder to executive positions. Under Bloomberg, a whole new layer of administrators was put in place, many with scant teaching experience. Their main qualification was graduating from either the Broad Superintendent's Academy of the Broad Center for the Management of School Systems, or from the Aspiring Principals Program of the NYC Leadership Academy, once headed by former GE chairman Jack Walsh. The first was the creation of multibillionaire charter school promoter Eli Broad, and boasted in 2009 that 43% of all large urban superintendent positions were filled by its graduates, while the second was multibillionaire Bloomberg's creature, supplying 466 principals of NYC schools over 14 years. Accompanying the privatizing charterization, this was the *corporatization of public education*.

The result was the chaos that characterized the New York City schools all last fall. After de Blasio closed all schools in November in anticipation of a Thanksgiving spike in COVID infections, a group of parents of "blended" students formed a group calling itself "Keep the Schools Open NYC." It quickly gathered 15,000 signatures to open schools, pointing to the low virus transmission rate in school, and the inferiority and harmfulness of "remote education" for their children, as well as the difficulty that closing schools posed for working parents, especially women. But while the group emphasized it was pro-science, a number of those speaking for it adopted an anti-labor position, blaming teachers unions for keeping schools closed. Saying he heard the parents "loud and clear," in early December the mayor reopened elementary schools for five-day-a-week instruction.

The colossal mismanagement of New York City schools last fall was not the result of teacher union resistance to reopening. After demanding that certain safety protocols and testing provisions be met, the United Federation of Teachers approved the reopening. Rather, the chaos in the schools this fall matched the disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring,<sup>5</sup> and more recently the turbulent rollout of vaccinations. In each case, you had squabbling bourgeois politicians and incompetent "managers" running a system serving the interests of capital rather than the needs of the population.

Now that Trump is out and Democrat Biden is calling to open the schools, suddenly the liberal media which earlier chronicled the endless twisting and turning of the stop-and-go NYC school reopening, now deems it a success story: "Despite Bumps, New York's Move to Open Schools Pays Dividends," *New York Times*, 14 February.

Public schools provided with adequate resources rather than starved for funds, run by union-led councils of teachers, students, parents and workers rather than under the control of an erratic mayor and arrogant educrats, *could have provided in-person education for all 1.1 million New York City public school students*. But that would require a class-struggle leadership of labor and

a workers party fighting on a transitional program pointing the way to a planned economy under a workers government. What we got instead was the chaos of capitalism. ■

## "Zoom School"...

*continued from page 52*

remotely. At the same time, this presents a serious privacy issue for families given that administrators and teachers can track student browser history, even outside school hours. So, if students are on YouTube at 2 a.m., administrators and teachers know about it and they know the exact video link they were watching. Administrators can even use GoGuardian to monitor teachers without their ever knowing. No need to join the Google Meet or Zoom call as a participant, just log onto GoGuardian spyware.

### Students Have It Rough

Students are feeling the full weight of remote learning. At many schools, students have up to seven classes in a row... if they could even manage to log on to all of them. The issues are endless: lack of access to stable internet connection and devices (many students are using their phones to attend synchronous classes and submit work, or are sharing devices with siblings); navigating new student email account registration; re-booting iPads and other devices distributed last spring that lost internet connection over the summer; joining multiple Google Classrooms with various links and codes, and dealing with endless changes in schedules, plus working out tough decisions with their families to go blended or fully remote... students have it rough. And to get help with technology, students and families have to request virtual meetings by filling out a form... online. In fact, students were still joining classes toward the end of the second marking period due to tech difficulties causing many to simply give up on school altogether.

Those who are able to log on experience all kinds of connectivity issues. Students are constantly knocked off Zoom calls and need to rejoin or have persistent complications with audio and microphones. As for teacher tech tools, many student devices and/or internet connections cannot sustain both a Zoom or Google Meet call and a Peardeck, EdPuzzle or Jamboard activity. With Nearpod and Peardeck, as with many other platforms, helping students log on at the start of class can take up to a third of the whole class period. For in-class activities, helping students find Google Slides assignments is another ordeal entirely. Often, students can't edit from their phones and need to download an additional Google Slides application to do so. While students with good internet service and devices may be able to excel on these platforms, immigrant, working class, and homeless families have an entirely different experience.

The pressing question in the Department of Education today is, "Are students learning?" And the answer is a resounding and emphatic *NO* in Zoom/Google Classroom hell, especially for working class, black, Latino, immigrant, and special education student populations. The teachers know it. The parents know it. And, importantly, the students experience it. ■

<sup>4</sup> *New York Post*, 16 May 2020.

<sup>5</sup> See "A Tale of Two Cities: Wuhan – New York," in *The Internationalist* No. 59, March-April 2020.

# For Teacher-Student-Parent-Worker Control of the Schools! Chaotic Reopening of NYC Schools: This Is What Mayoral Control Looks Like

## Use Union Power to Reopen Schools Safely!

Todd Heisler/The New York Times



First day of school, 1 October 2020, at JHS 157 in Queens, New York.

### By Class Struggle Education Workers/UFT

23 FEBRUARY 2021 – The deadly coronavirus pandemic led to the first-ever nationwide U.S. school shutdown. By March 25, every kindergarten-to-grade-12 (K-12) school in the country was closed. The measures, taken on a city-by-city and state-by-state basis, were essential as part of broader stay-at-home orders, which by mid-April covered 95% of the U.S. population.<sup>1</sup> Due to a criminally deficient public health system, the disease (COVID-19) by mid-February 2021 has infected over 28 million people and caused 500,000 deaths in the United States (out of more than 110 million cases and 2.4 million deaths worldwide). The economic toll has been staggering, setting off a “coronavirus depression,” whose effects will be felt for years. Meanwhile, school shutdowns – which for much of the country have extended into the fall and winter, and could last to the end of the school year in June, or later – have had and will have lasting consequences.

When schools closed suddenly in the spring, teachers and students had to go online with no preparation or adequate materials. Educators and administrators scrambled to acquire or invent curriculum, most students from low-income households didn’t have computers or reliable internet at home (63% in the case of the poorest families),<sup>2</sup> many had no quiet place to participate in

<sup>1</sup> “Which States and Cities Have Told Residents to Stay Home,” *New York Times*, 20 April 2020.

<sup>2</sup> “Not all kids have computers – and they’re being left behind with schools closed by the coronavirus,” Research brief on *The Conversation*, 8 May 2020.

remote classes, the platforms used had problems (“Zoombombing”), etc. For most students, “remote learning” was a contradiction in terms. A study based on assessments in the early fall showed that overall, students’ scores were down 13% in reading compared to previous years, and by 37% in math. Black and Hispanic students’ scores fell even more, reflecting that they were significantly (20%) more likely than white students to be learning remotely and half as likely to have had live contact with teachers.<sup>3</sup>

While coronavirus cases were escalating in much of the country, rates of infection and of positive tests for COVID-19 in the summer and early fall were far lower in New York City, making it possible to reopen schools. While some in the United Federation of Teachers called to keep the schools closed entirely until there was a vaccine, and to have all instruction remote, Class Struggle

Education Workers/UFT and the Internationalist Group demonstrated with signs declaring, “‘Remote Learning’ Widens Racist Gap in Education” and “Remote Learning: An Oxymoron.” The CSEW declared: “Where Pandemic Is Raging, Keep Schools Closed” but “Where Infection Rate Is Low, Schools Should Reopen Safely with Billions for Sanitation & Ventilation, Triple Classrooms Now, No Hiring Freeze, Hire Thousands.” And we called for “educator-led control of the schools by councils of teachers, students, parents and workers.”<sup>4</sup>

### Chaotic Reopening Due to Capitalist Constraints

The actual reopening of NYC schools in the fall was a story of unending chaos (see “Google + D.O.E. + de Blasio & Cuomo = Capitalist CHAOS”). For weeks, Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio insisted that, come what may, schoolhouse doors would open on September 10. But in the face of mounting pres-

<sup>3</sup> “The Learning Gap Is Getting Worse as Schools Rely on Remote Classes, Especially for Students of Color,” *Time*, 8 December 2020. The study was by the business consultants McKinsey & Co., *COVID-19 and learning loss – disparities grow and students need help* (December 2020) based on data from a Curriculum Associates Research Brief, *Understanding Student Needs: Early Results from Fall Assessments* (October 2020).

<sup>4</sup> “A Class-Struggle Program to Reopen New York City Schools Safely” (6 September 2020), *The Internationalist* No. 61, September-October 2020.





**CSEW on 3 August 2020: Open NYC schools safely. Both Democrats and Republicans have pushed for charterization, corporatization and privatization in bipartisan war on public education. We say: capitalists hands off the schools!**

sure from teachers, administrators and parents over safety and sanitation needs, and a strike threat by the UFT (which hasn't struck in decades), the mayor backed off and pushed back opening to September 21. Then, however, as the union insisted that no teachers would have to teach both in-person and remote classes, de Blasio and his schools chancellor Richard Carranza finally faced the fact that the Department of Education (D.O.E.) had a massive staffing crunch. So reopening was put off another week for elementary schools, and to October 1 for middle and high schools. But that was only the beginning of the confusion.

The UFT and the principals' association said that 10,000 more teachers would need to be hired to carry out effective teaching of students in the "blended" (or "hybrid") cohorts, who would come to school every other day, or every third day, the other days being remote. De Blasio finally agreed to hire 2,000 additional educators on a week's notice. By November, the D.O.E. said it had hired 5,600 new teachers and substitutes, plus sending 2,000 department staff with teaching licenses into the classrooms. But clearly this was not enough; soon many "in-person" classes were being delivered remotely, to students (from different classes) with laptops in school gyms! To actually get class sizes down to 10-15 students (necessary for social distancing, and for effective education) from the previous contractual limit of 30-34, so that *all* students could attend school in person, as the CSEW has demanded, would require *tens of thousands* more educators.

The UFT capitulated on its demand that everyone entering the schools upon reopening be tested, but its insistence on stricter safety protocols did have an effect. Along with mask-wearing requirements, every classroom was reportedly checked for ventilation, ostensibly with union participation. This led to some repairs, installing 13,700 MERV-13 filters and placing 15,000 air purifiers with HEPA filters in classrooms. But in many older buildings (and New York City has a lot) without central HVAC systems,

ventilation consisted of freeing windows that had been nailed shut or could only be opened a couple inches. A few schools with structural ventilation defects were not opened. Initial testing showed very few infected students and staff (0.17% positivity out of 16,000 tested). But by October 7, with community outbreaks in "hot zones" such as South Brooklyn, some 169 schools were temporarily closed.

Eventually, as infection rates crept up, and then in November sharply increased in many parts of the city, a citywide positivity rate of 3% was reached on November 18 and de Blasio shut down the whole system, citing a vow he had made in the summer. On December 7, elementary schools reopened, but only for students whose parents

had opted for "blended" by an arbitrary cutoff in mid-November. Still, testing of tens of thousands of students, teachers and staff had shown that schools were not a center of spreading the disease – the positivity rate in the schools was only 0.19%. But after the *closing* of the schools, New York's citywide positivity rate rose past 6% and the spread of COVID-19 among teachers and students *increased*. At the end of the week-long winter break, all but two buildings (out of more than 1,400) are operational, but there have been hundreds of temporary closures due to two or more unrelated cases in the building.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout this time, the Movement of Rank and File Educators (M.O.R.E.) caucus of the UFT, a coalition of liberal and reformist currents, has demanded "no full reopening of in-person schools until 14 days of no new cases" (M.O.R.E. statement, 1 September). In protests in September, while the CSEW called in a special supplement, "NYC Teachers: Use Your Union Power to Make Schools Safe to Reopen," M.O.R.E. supporters chanted, "1, 2, 3, 4, we demand close the doors." We noted that M.O.R.E.'s call for "equitable remote learning" is an "unrealizable pipedream," adding:

*"M.O.R.E.'s demand to keep schools closed until there are 0 cases in fact means indefinitely shutting down public education for the 114,000 homeless students, the 155,000 English-language learners, the 220,000 students with disabilities and many if not most of the 800,000 students living in poverty who constitute 70% of the entire student enrollment of the NYC public school system."*<sup>6</sup>

Subsequently, M.O.R.E. has called to "Shift all classes to remote format until the end of school calendar year" in June 2021 (Health Justice Working Group statement, 15 November). The same

<sup>5</sup> As of 20 February 2021. See <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/school-year-20-21/return-to-school-2020/health-and-safety/daily-covid-case-map>

<sup>6</sup> See "The Fight Over Reopening Schools Is a Class Battle," from the upcoming *Marxism & Education* No. 6.

demand to end in-person classes is raised by the UFT Solidarity Caucus (*The Chief*, 11 January). While M.O.R.E. poses as a “social justice” caucus, *this is a discriminatory and reactionary program*.

These supposed “progressives” hide behind the fact that a majority of the families of African American and Hispanic students (52% and 54% respectively) opted for remote instruction, as we discuss below. *Yet those are the students who stand to lose the most* – up to an entire year of education, according to one study – *by not having in-person classes*.<sup>7</sup> When the NYC Department of Education reports that only 43% of school bathrooms are operational, M.O.R.E. uses this to argue to keep schools shut, instead of demanding that the union force the D.O.E. to provide adequate sanitary facilities. M.O.R.E. is currently campaigning to “tax the rich,” a call it shares with de Blasio and many other Democrats. The issue is not raising more taxes but demanding the rulers pay the billions needed for safe, quality public education. Last August, NY State announced it was withholding 20% of (already cut-back) education allotments, *draining \$2.4 billion from NYC schools*.

The bottom line is that liberal and social-democratic education activists along with the labor bureaucracy chained to the Democratic Party all *accept the limits of the capitalist system*. They buy into the lie that “there is no money” – in the center of international finance capital, no less! They confine themselves to pressuring the bourgeois politicians to get a little *more*. In doing so, the union bureaucrats and wannabe bureaucrats adopt the terms of the ruling-class education “reformers” who have been on the warpath for decades demanding that teachers do more with less. What’s needed instead is to mount a *class offensive* uniting union power with the support of parents, students, all working people and the oppressed to *defeat the bipartisan capitalist assault on public education which continues amid the deadly pandemic*.

### The Battle Over Reopening Schools

The toll of school closures has been significant. NYC public school enrollment has fallen from 1.1 million students in 2019-20 to 960,000 in 2020-21, a huge drop of 140,000. In addition, with the large majority of students receiving only remote instruction, a significant number of those enrolled have not been doing school-work. This is reflected in 71,000 students who received “course in progress” (NX) grades, or incompletes, for the first semester of this school year. (Of these, the hardest hit are 13,800 English language learners and 20,100 special needs students.) The D.O.E. says it has distributed roughly 400,000 iPad tablets to students since the start of the pandemic, but as of December 100,000 were still not in students’ hands. Even then, many (particularly homeless students) have problems with connectivity, while untold numbers are connecting to school with cellphones.<sup>8</sup>

With the start of 2021, elementary schools are open and now middle schools are slated to reopen, so that by the end of February up to 250,000 New York City public school students may be attending in-person classes, about half of them five days a week.

(High schools, which were opened for a month and a half in the fall, will remain closed for now.) The positivity rate from random in-school coronavirus testing of students, teachers and staff from October 2020 until now is 0.55%, far below the citywide average (now around 8.5%), and there have been no significant outbreaks since schools reopened in the fall. The UFT leadership has supported the middle school reopening so long as the safety standards are maintained. And vaccination for 15,500 teachers has been arranged through the union, while some thousands more have been vaccinated through city and state programs.

Last fall, there was widespread resistance to resuming in-person instruction in part due to the demands from Republican president Donald Trump, who sought to force teachers back to school regardless of safety conditions and community transmission. But now Democratic president Joe Biden is pushing to “reopen schools in 100 days.” He is supported by national teachers union leaders – Dr. Jill Biden, who teaches in a community college, is a member of the National Education Association (NEA) – and his \$1.9 trillion “American Rescue Program” includes \$130 billion earmarked for K-12 education. So now a rash of articles in the liberal media blame teacher unions for closed schools (e.g., “Teachers’ Union Prevents Return to Schools,” *New York Times*, 26 January). And the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have issued an “operational strategy” to “get all students back to school safely, and as soon as possible.”<sup>9</sup>

These issues came to a head in the long standoff between the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and Democratic mayor Lori Lightfoot that ended with an agreement, approved by the union membership on February 9, to gradually bring pre-kindergarten through eighth grade students back to school by providing vaccination, setting criteria for temporary school closures according to health metrics, providing frequent testing of school personnel, dropping disciplinary measures against teachers who refused orders to return to school due to unsafe conditions, providing more accommodations to work remotely for employees with household members with medical risks, and predominantly union “building- and district-level safety committees empowered to enforce health and safety protocols.” The deal was brokered by American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Randi Weingarten in personal consultation with Joe and Jill Biden.

Class Struggle Education Workers/UFT has called from the outset, beginning in early August, to *use union power to make schools safe to reopen*. Those who demanded that schools be kept closed even where virus contagion was low (and now even with vaccine becoming available) instead of fighting to make them safe have made a colossal error. We warned that this “plays into the hands of enemies of public education, both conservative and liberal,” aiding Trump and the privatizers and union-bashers who seek to set parents against teachers. It also runs counter to the overwhelming evidence that “remote education” *can’t* work for the great majority of students and exacerbates racial/class inequalities. And it blows the critical opportunity to win important safety measures which are also key to quality education, notably by sharply reducing class size. CSEW wrote: “*Teachers unions right now have power like never before – we have to use it.*”

<sup>9</sup> Transcript of CDC-USDOE press conference, 12 February.

<sup>7</sup> See the McKinsey study cited above, Appendix 6.

<sup>8</sup> To top it off, the College Board announced that students could not take advanced placement exams with their iPads, even though it accepted that last year.



The *Wall Street Journal* (29 June 2020) noticed this as well, whining, “Teachers unions are ... in a position to hold the economy hostage.” “Teachers unions know how to play hardball,” said the voice of finance capital, noting that the AFT and NEA “have signaled that they would consider strikes if schools reopen without sufficient safety protections.” Damn right. We called to “Get Ready to Strike to Make NYC Schools Safe to Reopen.” While UFT tops did threaten to strike over safety, and got concessions, they did not use their power to win lasting gains. An AFT document, “Reopening Schools During a Time of Triple Crisis: Financial Implications” (June 2020) put the cost of reopening schools at \$116.5 billion. Hiring the huge numbers of new teachers needed to ensure small class sizes *would probably push the cost to over \$500 billion*. This was the time to fight for that.

Yet neither the August 2020 NYC Memorandum of Agreement nor the February 2021 Chicago “Framework” required sharply lowering class sizes, and keeping them low. On the contrary, the D.O.E.-UFT agreement maintains class sizes at the same level as in the existing contract (30 to 34 for elementary, middle and high schools). That would fill an average NYC classroom, and *would make social distancing impossible*. Moreover, the MOA allowed *up to 64-68 students in remote classes* of “blended” cohorts, which along with a huge amount of grading *would make any real interaction between teachers and students impossible*. And there are reports of classes for special needs students (required by state law to be no more than 12-15) with 30-38 students, *which would make individual attention impossible*. Unionists fighting to defend public education, teachers’ rights and students’ well-being should have demanded small class sizes.

The negative consequences of remote-only classes for students’ education, social development and mental health are undeniable and well documented, particularly for the youngest and the most oppressed and disadvantaged. Educators have made heroic efforts in designing remote classes with multimedia content, seeking innovative ways to get student participation, but genuine education is collaborative, and you can’t get that staring at a screen – especially with most students not showing their faces (and surroundings) for good reason. If the likes of M.O.R.E. deny or can’t see this, it reflects among other things a kind of petty-bourgeois “millennial” blind spot, to put it generously, in which facility with technology is presumed to be the case for all teachers and for all children.

The medical concerns of teachers and parents are very real – witness outbreaks of influenza in schools. However, studies have repeatedly shown that, in contrast to the flu, COVID-19 transmission among children is sharply lower than among adults, particularly among elementary-school-age children. Moreover, evidence from the fall semester in studies in Mississippi, North Carolina and Wisconsin where schools were open indicate that “there has been little evidence that schools have contributed meaningfully to increased community transmission,” and that “within-school transmissions were very rare.”<sup>10</sup> Requiring *universal face mask use*, maintaining social

distancing by *reducing class sizes*, preventing crowding in common areas, increasing *room air ventilation* and expanding *screening testing* can keep schools safer from COVID infection than in the community, for students, educators and staff. But that requires *union action to ensure safe schools*.

In addition, unions must insist on *expanding accommodations* allowing for at-home work for older teachers, those with underlying medical conditions and with household members in high-risk categories. These provisions are vital “particularly for paraprofessionals, ... school aides and food service workers,” who are disproportionately older, African American and Latino, “and thus at greater risk,” as we wrote last September.<sup>11</sup> In addition, education unions should demand *vaccine for all teachers and staff*. The CDC, in rolling out its February 12 “Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools,” said that vaccinations would be nice, but not necessary. Labor should respond: if you want the kids in school, provide vaccine to the school workers. Punto. *Winning this would strengthen unions for enforcing the safety demands as well*.

### For Union-Led Teacher-Student-Parent-Worker Control of the Schools

On top of these demands, a key element should be the formation of *union-led teacher-parent-student-worker committees* at every school to *inspect and sign off on reopening plans*, and to see that they are rigorously followed afterwards. This would go a long way toward overcoming much of the reluctance of many African American and Latino parents to send their children to school for in-person classes, even as their kids suffer most from the educational divide intensified by remote instruction. Reporting on this, an article in the *New York Times* (2 February), “Missing in School Reopening Plans: Black Families’ Trust,” quoted Farah Despeignes, a black mother and elected parent advocate with two sons in the city schools, saying: “Because I can’t see for myself what’s going on in that building, I’m not going to trust somebody else to keep my children safe.”

She is right to say that “everything that has happened in this country just in the last year” proves that black people “have no reason to trust the government.” The chaotic experience of reopening schools this fall reinforced justified mistrust in the school administration. And school buildings in lower-income, predominantly non-white neighborhoods are generally in worse shape than those in the Upper East Side and Upper West Side, Brooklyn Heights, Riverdale or Kew Gardens. But if parents were part of union-led committees that could determine if bathrooms are broken or filthy, if air flow is inadequate, if there are too many desks in the classrooms, if rapid testing is not available – then they would not only “have a say,” they would have *power* to insist: no in-person school until these are fixed. If not, then shut the system down with mass strike action. Any attempt to mobilize community opposition to such a strike would be doomed to fail.

In New York, the United Federation of Teachers under Randi Weingarten and now Michael Mulgrew supported mayoral control of the schools when it was introduced by billionaire

<sup>10</sup> “Data and Policy to Guide Opening Schools Safely to Limit the Spread of SARS-CoV-2 Infection,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), 26 January.

<sup>11</sup> See “A Class-Struggle Program to Reopen New York City Schools Safely,” and related articles on the CSEW web site, edworkersunite.blogspot.com.

mayor Michael Bloomberg in 2002, and the UFT continues to do so today. The M.O.R.E. caucus says it opposes mayoral control, but to be replaced by what? A 23 April 2012 statement called for “an elected people’s board of education which represents the interests of teachers, students, parents, and community.” In Chicago, the CTU calls for an elected school board, a demand Mayor Lightfoot campaigned on, but then rejected after she was elected. But an elected board, while preferable to mayoral dictatorship, is no guarantee of any real change. Education is such a big issue for the ruling class today that billionaires like Bill Gates, Eli Broad and Bloomberg spend millions to buy school board elections.<sup>12</sup> That’s elections under capitalism: money talks.

As we wrote last fall: “The challenge and problems posed in reopening schools are a key moment to *fight against mayoral dictatorship*, and for *educator-led control of the schools by councils of teachers, students, parents and workers*. This was a vital component of the educational policies of the early Soviet republic following the 1917 October Revolution.”<sup>13</sup> Teacher-student-parent-worker control of the schools is “only” a democratic demand, as is the call for free, secular, coeducational, integrated quality public education for all. But it’s no accident that right-wingers routinely label public education a “communist plot” – Marx and Engels were among the very first to call for this, in their 1848 *Communist Manifesto*. Ultimately, it will take a socialist revolution to win these demands, over opposition by the capitalists, their parties and politicians. *But a union-led fight to safely reopen schools can be a huge first step.*

That means, first and foremost, taking on the Democratic Party. From the beginning, the fight over school reopening has been a political fight. Trump and his education czarina Betsy DeVos are sworn enemies of public education, who tried every possible avenue to privatize it – and then suddenly they cynically posed as defenders of public schools. Teachers unions and activists went all-out to elect Biden and a Democratic Congress. But now it’s Democrat Biden pushing to reopen, while Bloomberg (now once again a Democrat) calls on the president to “stand up to the unions” and tells teachers to “suck it up” and get back to the classroom.<sup>14</sup> So, yes, the labor-haters and union-bashers are on the warpath. The way to defeat them is not to seek to keep schools closed where community transmission rates make it possible to reopen gradually, but rather to *use union power to set the terms for safe reopening with lasting gains.*

Various leftists have put forward a simplistic argument that opening the schools is just a plot by the bosses, who need workers

back on the job to exploit them. Thus the internet outlet Left Voice (9 February) writes: “Concern for students is just a cover to gain support for these attacks against educators. School reopenings are a linchpin in getting the entire economy back up and running for the sake of capitalist profits.” But working people are genuinely concerned about students – their kids – and they also need to work. LV says, “We need to pay non-essential workers to stay home.” The idea that “we” are going pay most of the working class to stay home for months under capitalism is idiot utopian reformism. It means that the petty-bourgeois can safely work from home while low-wage essential workers are on the job keeping the population fed, the hospitals functioning and public transport running.

There’s not one word in the LV article recognizing the toll that keeping children out of school has on their education and social development. What about the documented rise of anxiety, depression and suicides of kids isolated in their homes, with no connection to school and friends? And it is striking that from these self-proclaimed socialist feminists, the only mention of mothers who have left jobs to stay home with their children is dismissively quoting Biden’s reference to their predicament. It’s true that the capitalists need to have the schools open in order to put the economy into high gear: that’s what gives education unions extraordinary power right now. It’s why if unions do play “hardball,” as the *Wall Street Journal* fears, we can win. But labor is saddled with sellout leaders who barely even play softball because they are beholden to the bosses and their Democratic Party. *A class-struggle leadership is needed for the unions to break with the Democrats and build a workers party.*

The battle over school reopening is part of a decades-long fight against a *bipartisan capitalist war on public education*, as Wall Street billionaires (Bloomberg), Silicon Valley tycoons (Bill Gates), hedge fund operators (Democrats for Education Reform) and Democratic Party hacks (Arne Duncan, Rahm Emanuel) unite with Republicans from Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump in the drive to to charterize, corporatize and privatize public schools. To defeat this onslaught, it is necessary to fight it down the line. That means, in the middle of the pandemic, to *fight to integrate New York’s notoriously segregated schools*, using union power to *demand an end to and block screening for selective schools*. It means *stopping high-stakes testing* during this crisis, which exacerbates the education abyss between the haves and have-nots. It means locking-in *small class sizes*.<sup>15</sup> And it means getting *cops out of the schools*, as the CSEW has long demanded.

The disastrous state of public education, like the horrific death toll of the COVID-19 pandemic and mass unemployment, are vivid expressions of a rotting capitalist system sinking deeper into barbarism. The struggle for health, safety, quality education and every other measure of social well-being requires nothing less than *socialist revolution*, in the U.S. and globally. ■

<sup>12</sup> As we noted in our article, “Mobilize Bay Area Workers to Win Oakland Teachers Strike” (edworkersunite.blogspot.com, February 2019), “Bloomberg has dropped more than \$5 million on California elections to elect charter school supporters, including \$300,000 in 2017 to finance the Great Oakland (GO) coalition that wants to turn half of local schools into charters.”

<sup>13</sup> See “The Fight Over Reopening Schools Is a Class Battle” (edworkersunite.blogspot.com, 26 September 2020).

<sup>14</sup> The “former self-appointed Emperor of New York City” demagogically declared on CNBC that “Poor people don’t have iPads, they don’t have Wi-Fi.” A blogger at the pro-Democratic Party *Daily Kos* (5 February) calculated that Bloomberg could buy an iPad Air at full price for every student in the NYC public schools and still be worth \$54.2 billion.

<sup>15</sup> The ruling class would never send their offspring to classes of 30+ students (in NYC, up to 45 in Los Angeles!). A survey of the top private schools in New York City shows ratios of no more than 5 to 7 students per teacher. See “A Guide to Reopening NYC’s \$50,000-a-Year Elite Private Schools,” *Bloomberg*, 16 August 2020. CSEW calls to abolish all private schools, turn charters into public schools, all under union-led teacher-student-parent-worker control.



# Struggle Against Union-Busting in the Pandemic Chicago Teachers in the Eye of the Storm

**For Teacher-Student-Parent-Worker Control of Reopening Schools**



Anthony Vazquez / Chicago Sun-Times

**On Monday, 11 January 2021, teachers held class from their laptops set up outside Suder Montessori magnet elementary school in Chicago to protest lockout of teachers from remote teaching.**

## **By Class Struggle Education Workers**

9 MARCH 2021 – For over a month, a tense stand-off between the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and Mayor Lori Lightfoot – who controls Chicago Public Schools (CPS) – was the focal point in a nationwide tug-of-war over reopening schools, many closed since last spring due to COVID-19. Union-bashers like *Forbes* magazine (4 February) called on the CPS to “learn from the 1981 air controllers strike,” where Ronald Reagan declared the walkout illegal and fired every striker. In mid-January, Lightfoot locked out nearly 150 teachers from Google Classroom accounts and cut off their pay for continuing to teach remotely and refusing the CPS order to return to elementary schools, even as city residents were being told to stay at home. Union members reported that buildings were “filthy” and “in

various states of disrepair” with inadequate ventilation.

The media has portrayed the conflict as the union opposing opening schools, yet the CTU put forward a number of specific demands for safely reopening. What the fight was really about was *union-busting*: a high-handed mayor backed by super-rich privatizing education “reformers” (including well-connected Democrats) sought to force the teachers to their knees. A barrage of anti-CTU articles (including in the *Sun-Times*, part-owned by the Chicago Federation of Labor) was part of a national drive to blame teacher unions for keeping schools closed and to stir up parents against them. While the CPS was forced to backpedal, even as talks were in final stages, the mayor went ballistic, accusing the union of “leaving us with a big bag of nothing” and again raising the threat of a lockout. In short, *this was a fight for all workers*.

The clash in Chicago is part of a surge of labor battles across the country in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. In some places, workers have taken the initiative, as in the strike last May by fruit packinghouse workers in Yakima, Washington, and more recently the Teamster strike at the giant Hunts Point produce market in New York City in January as well as the drive for union recognition underway at Amazon in Bessemer, Alabama. More commonly, employers are out to bust unions and organizing drives with lockouts and brass-knuckled intimidation tactics. The *Guardian* (26 January) reported on “US companies using the pandemic as a tool to break unions,” highlighting the lockout of Chicago teachers and the Portland Trail Blazers basketball team owners’ replacement of IATSE<sup>1</sup> arena workers with non-union managers.

Significantly, in Chicago both sides looked to the new administration of Democrat Joe Biden in Washington to resolve the dispute. On January 18, Biden said in a press conference, “The teachers I know, they want to work. They just want to work in a safe environment, as safe as we can rationally make it, and we can do that.” Both the Democratic mayor and the pro-Democratic CTU leadership claimed this supported their positions. That statement was the result of a weekend visit by American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Randi Weingarten to the White House where she met with the president and Dr. Jill Biden, a member of the National Education Association (NEA), the other main teachers union. A week later, Weingarten (a member of the Democratic National Committee) brokered the final deal.

In that “Framework for Resumption of In-Person Instruction,” approved by a 2-1 majority vote of the 25,000-member CTU on February 9, CPS still refused to agree to provide vaccination for all teachers before being required to return to school, and did not provide accommodations to teach remotely for all who have household members with medical risk. Nevertheless, the union did win significant gains. CPS had sought to force teachers back with no limitations on reopening or rules on quarantining due to an outbreak; instead, under the “Framework,” criteria were set for temporarily closing classrooms, schools and the entire CPS according to specific health metrics. Provisions were made for frequent testing of teachers and staff (weekly in high COVID count areas, biweekly elsewhere) and for air purifiers in all rooms in use.

The CPS initially had no plan for vaccinating teachers; in the agreement, the city agreed to provide 2,000 immediate vaccinations for pre-kindergarten and special education staff, and “at least 1,500 first vaccine doses per week to CPS employees.” Pushing back the dates for students returning to school (K-to-5 on March 1, grades 6 to 8 on March 8), a month after originally planned, will enable more teachers and staff to be vaccinated. (Now the school board has done a full 180 and is talking about requiring vaccination.) Disciplinary steps against teachers who refused to return to unsafe schools were dropped, although their docked pay will be litigated. And CPS agreed to juggle schedules to provide more accommodations for those with at-risk household members, while gratuitously forcing some on unpaid leave rather than letting them teach remotely.

<sup>1</sup> International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees Local 28.

State regulations require masking for everyone in schools.

What was won were a number of partial measures, which although complicated and detailed are significant gains in protecting the health and safety of everyone in the schools in the fraught COVID-19 environment. Plus, by hanging tough and threatening to strike, the CTU thwarted the mayor’s attempt to walk all over the union. It was a setback for those who insist on keeping the schools closed when it’s not necessary to contain the spread of the virus – which plays into the hands of the enemies of public education.<sup>2</sup> But the safety measures were a step forward for teachers, staff and students, who desperately need in-person education. An important gain was the formation of union-led “building- and district-level safety committees empowered to enforce health and safety protocols.” The biggest hole was the failure to lock in smaller class sizes.

Many liberal/radical teacher union activists fell into the trap of hysterically calling to keep the schools closed until whenever, which in many cases was a knee-jerk reaction to Trump’s call to open them, or else. They were accompanied, as usual, by opportunist leftists who chase after every “progressive” movement, no matter how misdirected or even reactionary its program. Now that the Democrats in office are insisting on a return to school, the rad-libs and reformists are in a pickle. In contrast, the Internationalist Group and Class Struggle Education Workers, opposing Republicans and Democrats, called from August on for teachers to “Use Your Union Power to Make Schools Safe to Reopen,” including, if necessary, using strike action. And specifically: “*At every school, teacher-student-parent-worker committees must approve reopening.*”<sup>3</sup>

### For Union-Led Teacher-Student-Parent-Worker Control of the Schools

A key issue is the demand for an elected Board of Education to replace mayoral control which has been a hot issue for decades. The virulently anti-labor *Chicago Tribune* (4 March 2021) headlined, “Fight for an elected CPS board ‘not going to go away’.” Lori Lightfoot supported this demand until she was elected mayor. Now she says, “We would never have opened without mayoral control.” She still claims to be for an elected school board, but comes up with all sorts of reasons why it’s not practical right away. One thing is true, though: in any election these days big money will play a big role. Leading capitalists have shown they are prepared to spend millions on influencing (buying) school board elections and pushing charter schools, in Los Angeles (Eli Broad), Oakland (Michael Bloomberg), Seattle (Bill Gates) and elsewhere.

As schools were reopening in New York City last fall, Class Struggle Education Workers stressed that this is a

<sup>2</sup> See “The Fight Over Reopening Schools Is a Class Battle,” *The Internationalist* No. 61, September-October 2020, where we analyze the evidence showing limited spread of the coronavirus among children (particularly those of elementary and middle school age) and the damage to students’ education, social development and mental health of remote-only schooling. Experience from school reopening in the fall only confirms these facts.

<sup>3</sup> See “A Class-Struggle Program to Reopen New York City Schools Safely,” *The Internationalist* No. 61, September-October 2020.



key moment to “*fight against mayoral dictatorship, and for educator-led control of the schools by councils of teachers, students, parents and workers.*” Even elected school boards preside over huge bureaucracies and are subject to pressure from bourgeois politicians and billionaire “philanthropists” pushing charters, standardized tests (Common Core, S.A.T.), teacher evaluations (merit pay, test scores), etc. Public education, with its steady cash flow, attracts contractors, vendors and privatizers, all seeking to turn the schools into profit platforms amid the falling profit rates of decaying capitalism. And they all want to break the power of teachers unions.

To defeat this onslaught and provide quality education for all, it is urgent to take control of the schools out of the grip of the Democrats, plutocrats and educrats and place it in the hands of those actually involved in public education. That is no small order. Teacher-student-parent-worker control of the schools is a simple democratic demand, but it will take a revolution to achieve it on a comprehensive scale. As we have noted, this was a key part of the Bolsheviks’ educational policies following the 1917 Revolution (later undone by Stalin). Its power was attested to by the educational philosopher John Dewey when he visited the Soviet Union in 1928.<sup>4</sup> In the U.S., Dewey with his program of connecting schools and work was limited to a single experimental school – the Chicago Lab School, today an elite private school.

An elected school board would certainly be better than the present mayoral dictatorship, but most cities and counties in the U.S. have that already. The fight for control of the schools by union-led councils of teachers, students, parents and workers confronts powerful entrenched interests. But in the present crisis situation, as parents and students clamor to have a say over school reopening while teachers and staff are battling an arrogant mayor and CPS administration, it could win wide support. And you don’t have to wait until the next election or next contract or next school year to start. The CTU, along with unions representing janitors and staff, could take the lead now in forming such councils on a school-by-school basis and insisting on their right to inspect and sign off on the opening of any building or school.

### **Break with the Democrats – Cops Out of the Schools!**

A serious fight to win all the union’s safety demands, as well as to ensure drastically lower class sizes (see “Chicago Mayor Tries to Bully Teachers: “Show Up or Showdown,” on page 66), would have required a hard-fought strike against Democratic administrations from Chicago to Springfield and Washington. The union leadership was not prepared to do that. On the contrary, from the CTU in Chicago to the AFT and NEA nationwide, the teachers unions are bound hand and foot to the Democratic Party. In many states they constitute the Democrats’ apparatus, doing most of the phone-banking and door-to-door canvassing. Yet despite Joe Biden’s claim

<sup>4</sup> See John Dewey, “New Schools for a New Era,” in *Marxism and the Battle Over Education*, *The Internationalist* special supplement (2d. edition), January 2008.

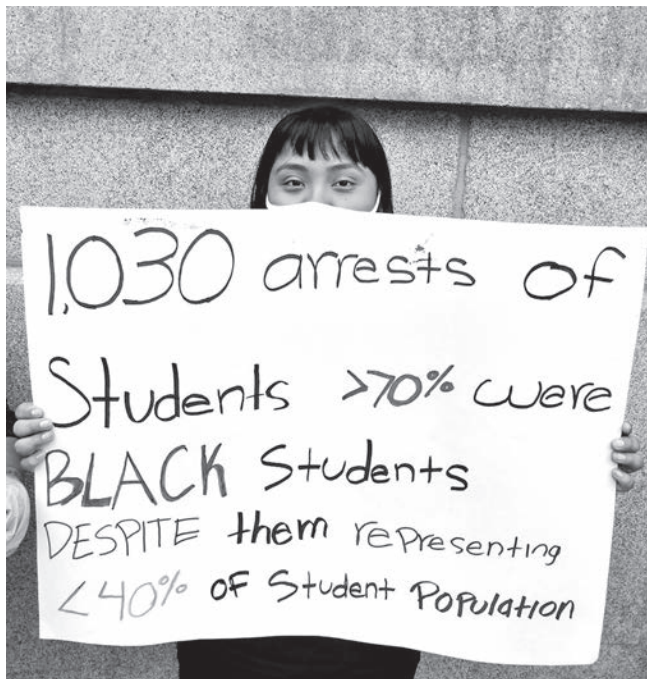
that he would be “the most pro-union president you’ve ever seen,” the Democratic Party is a capitalist party, defending the interests of Wall Street, Silicon Valley, Walmart, Loop bankers and the Chicago Board of Trade *against the working people*, including teachers.

This fight is a continuation of a long history of Democratic Party attacks on the teachers union in Chicago. In 1995, Democratic mayor Richard M. Daley – citing the fact that the CTU struck nine times between 1969 and 1987 – imposed mayoral control of city schools. He also pushed through Section 4.5 of the Illinois Labor Relations Act, allowing the CPS to refuse to bargain over various school issues, notably class size. Daley, who held office for 22 years, from 1989 to 2011, also looked for every opportunity to axe union jobs and privatize. Democratic mayor Rahm Emanuel (President Barack Obama’s former chief of staff), in office from 2011 to 2019, campaigned for office by declaring war on the CTU. Democratic mayor Lightfoot called for repeal of Section 4.5 in her election campaign, but reversed course on taking office.

One important reason why the CTU didn’t fight for smaller class sizes in the recent stand-off is that its leaders hope they’re about to overturn Section 4.5. This blatantly anti-labor law only applies to bargaining with “an educational employer whose territorial boundaries are coterminous with those of a city having a population in excess of 500,000” (guess where in Illinois that might be!). Bills to repeal it have been passed by both houses of the state legislature and the legislation is now on Democratic governor J.B. Pritzker’s desk awaiting his signature. CTU president Jesse Sharkey and other CTU tops doubtless want to make nice with the governor (who was endorsed in the 2018 election by the Illinois Federation of Labor and the CTU’s executive board, but not its House of Delegates), to show that they can play by the rules.

Yet those rules, and capitalist “law and order” generally, are stacked against labor, workers and the oppressed. Whether it’s Section 4.5 in Illinois or New York’s no-strike Taylor Law, these are measures by which capital ties the hands of workers’ organizations. Another is SB7, the bill approved in 2011 by CTU-endorsed Democratic governor Pat Quinn that amended the Illinois School Code to require three-quarters of all members of a bargaining unit (like the CTU) to vote to strike for it to be legal. Labor bureaucrats often hide behind these anti-union laws to head off calls for militant action. CTU then-president Karen Lewis actually *supported* SB7 and CTU leaders met secretly with Democrats in preparing it. But in order to defend the unions, it is necessary to prepare the ranks to defy such laws. *Playing by the bosses’ rules is sure to lose.*

Lewis died on the eve of the CPS-CTU deal and was widely eulogized, in particular for standing up to the bully Rahm Emanuel early on. Yet in the 2012 strike, after a vigorous week on the picket lines, when “King Rahm” called on the courts to ban the walkout, the CTU leadership under the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (C.O.R.E.) buckled, ramming through a sellout contract that the CTU House of Delegates had voted down. The settlement betrayed the struggle against the racist closure of 49 Chicago schools, which the CTU had highlighted



**A student holds a sign outside meeting on “defunding” Chicago’s school police. All police and security guards out of the schools, and out of the unions!**

in building community support leading up to the strike. It also gave up seniority in layoffs and introduced teacher evaluation based on student scores in standardized tests.<sup>5</sup>

C.O.R.E. has been deeply enmeshed in Democratic Party politics since winning control of the union in 2010.<sup>6</sup> Even as a supporter of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization when he was union vice president, Sharkey has endorsed Democrats over and over. The CTU pushed hard for Democrat Jesús “Chuy” García for mayor in 2015, for Obama and now Biden as U.S. president. In the 2020 election the CTU endorsed 43 candidates for the state legislature, all Democrats. And last December, Sharkey and other local AFT leaders penned a letter to president-elect Biden, presented at a photo op with AFT leader Weingarten, saying that “having one of our own in the White House” gave them “hope.”

Despite the blatant efforts to nail the unions by one Democratic mayor after another, the AFT and CTU leaders’ strategy is to chain union power to this bosses party, even as it keeps kicking them in the teeth. As Jim Vail of the *Second City Teacher* blog (1 February 2021) noted, one of the main forces behind Mayor Lightfoot’s diktat ordering teachers back to school no matter what was the sinister outfit Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), which has long attacked the CTU and teachers unions in general. During the standoff over Chicago schools, DFER president Shavar Jeffries “said powerful teachers unions are standing in the way of bringing back students,” according to an AP (31 January 2021) dispatch. The

group, a creature of multi-billionaire hedge fund operators who seek to feed off charter schools, earlier put forward CPS CEO Janice Jackson as a candidate for Biden’s education secretary.

Now Biden’s U.S. Department of Education has sent letters to state education departments saying that they must hold federally mandated standardized tests this year, even though most students around the country are having remote instruction. This is ridiculous! It can’t measure “the impact COVID-19 has had on learning,” as the tests were not held last school year, and this year conditions are so chaotic, with online learning burn-out and traumatized students, that it’s impossible to measure anything. Even in “normal” times, such high-stakes testing is racist and class-based, used to exclude minority, immigrant and working-class students from higher education. They are also a favorite tool to go after teachers by measuring their “output” in the form of student scores. But, never mind, its “Welcome back, students! Take this test. No talking.”

AFT leader Weingarten said she found the use of standardized tests “frustrating.” Education officials in several states, including school principals in Illinois, signed letters opposing the tests. In New York, departing schools chancellor Richard Carranza urged parents to “opt out.” But rather than lamentation, letters, lobbying Dr. Biden and looking to parents, *class-struggle teacher unionists should use their power to shut down high-stakes tests, as our comrades in Brazil have done.*<sup>7</sup> Another issue is the CPS’ grading policy, where F grades are being given to elementary students at more than twice the rate as last year, particularly to black and Hispanic students. The CTU should put a stop to this racist atrocity and seek to bring back the thousands of students who have dropped out altogether, particularly in the highest-poverty schools.

There is also the presence of police in the schools, where they criminalize African American and Latino students. Last summer, as tens of thousands marched in Chicago along with millions across the U.S. to denounce racist police murder, the CTU called a demo to “defund the police,” attended by many students. On June 24, the school board voted 4-3 to keep cops in the schools. In December, the CTU called on CPS to hire more counselors and fund them by “reallocating funds from the Chicago Police Department.” We have explained that the calls to “abolish the police” are a liberal/reformist utopia, while simply transferring money from one budget line to will change nothing.<sup>8</sup> But we have long called for getting all police – and security guards – out of the schools, and out of the unions.<sup>9</sup> *As schools reopen, the CTU should insist that they be cop-free. Starting now!*

This underscores that the battle over the schools must be part and parcel of the broader struggle against racist capitalism. As we have noted, Joe Biden was not only the author of the infamous 1994 Crime Bill that escalated mass incarceration

<sup>7</sup> See “Teachers in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil Stop Work to Stop High-Stakes Test,” in *The Internationalist*, Summer 2012.

<sup>8</sup> “‘Abolish the Police’ Under Capitalism?” *The Internationalist* No. 60, May-July 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Security guards should be removed from SEIU Local 73 (representing CPS staff) and from the schools altogether. Along with aggressive treatment of students generally, CPS security guards have been accused of hundreds of cases of sexual misconduct a year.

<sup>5</sup> See “Chicago Teachers: Strike Was Huge, Settlement Sucks,” *The Internationalist*, September 2012.

<sup>6</sup> See “Lessons of Chicago CORE,” *The Internationalist* No. 33, Summer 2011.



in black ghettos, but also in the 1970s he made a name for himself leading the segregationist pack in Congress in opposing school integration through busing. Yet desegregating Chicago's schools must be a top priority for teachers in a city where 60% of the population and 83% of the 341,000 students (pre-pandemic) are black and Latino. Also key is the struggle against racist police brutality. During the protests against police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others, Lightfoot mobilized the Chicago Police Department along with hundreds of Illinois State Police and Illinois National Guard. Alone among big city mayors she *accepted* Trump's offer to deploy 200 federal agents, supposedly to "fight crime," and she siphoned pandemic aid funds to the cops.

### Oust the Bureaucrats – For a Class-Struggle Workers Party!

Most of the left has acted along with other "progressives" as a cheering squad for the CTU leadership. This includes the Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL), which had not a word against the Democratic Party ("Chicago Teachers Union's commitment to democracy pays off," *Liberation*, 2 February 2021); and the Maoist Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO), which called in the 2020 election to "defeat Trump," i.e., vote for Biden ("Chicago Teachers Union ratifies framework agreement for return to in-person learning," *Fightback*, 11 February 2021). In *These Times* (10 February 2021), speaking for the right wing of the Democratic (Party) Socialists of America (DSA) gushed: "After Threatening Strike, Chicago Teachers Set 'New Standard' With Safer School Reopening Plan." *Jacobin* (20 February 2021), for the DSA "lefts," was more equivocal, citing Sharkey saying, "This is not the agreement you deserve."

Socialist Alternative (SAlt), on the other hand, sides with keep-the-schools-closed advocates who voted against the agreement, criticizing Biden and the Weingarten leadership of the AFT ("Chicago: Lessons from the Fight Against Lori Lightfoot's Reckless School Reopening," 1 March). While SAlt criticizes "CORE's capitulation at the bargaining table in 2021," it looks back to its "fighting roots." Yet even before taking office, C.O.R.E. leaders were bureaucrats-in-training. After a long wish-list of liberal/reformist demands, SAlt calls to "completely transform our current education system," but doesn't say what that would consist of or how it would come about (nothing about socialist revolution, of course). And the fake-militant posturing is belied by SAlt star Seattle councilwoman Kshama Sawant's announcement that she had joined the DSA.

As for Left Voice, an internet outlet of online gadflies that buzz around the left flank of the DSA, its article on the CPS-CTU settlement reproduces the *Jacobin* arguments, with the added twist that it calls for "rank and file teachers across the country" to "come together to fight the national union bureaucracies." Just the national bureaucracies? Thus, LV slyly supports the local C.O.R.E. bureaucrats while striking a critical pose toward the AFT/NEA bureaucrats, when all – locally and nationally – are deeply entwined with the Democrats, who are their bosses at almost every level of government. Such slick posturing is a stock-in-trade of these professional tailists, whose M.O. is to

put a "left" flip on whatever is the reformist or popular-frontist movement of the moment. Telling the hard truth to the masses, whether it's popular or not, as the rules of Leon Trotsky's Fourth International require, is definitely not LV's thing.

Many on the pseudo-socialist left seem to think that calling to keep public schools closed when it's not necessary for public health reasons is some kind of super-radical demand. It is not. It not only aids the Trumpers, who are demagogically appealing to parents to turn them against the teachers union. It also lines up with the rabid wannabe union-busters of the "World Scab Web Site" (WSWS), which has been pushing the keep-'em-closed line with a phantom "Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee." At the same time, it called on workers at Amazon's warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama to vote "no" on union recognition.<sup>10</sup>

Keeping schools shuttered when they could be reopened with rigorous safety precautions mainly hurts African American and Latino students, who are suffering most from the absence of in-person school. If they and their parents have been less likely to sign up for return to school, that is largely because (a) they don't trust the authorities, with good reason; and (b) schools in lower-income neighborhoods are objectively in worse shape than the few schools with significant numbers of white students. The answer to this is, first, to insist that the schools be fixed up, that thousands more teachers be hired and classrooms found; and second, put the teachers, parents, students and workers in control of reopening.

The Chicago Teachers Union has periodically gone on strike against Democratic mayors who have attacked labor rights. It has opposed racist school closures and called for rent abatements, though typically those demands serve as window dressing and evaporate when it gets down to concrete strike demands. It has won some notable strikes, such as the first-ever charter school strike in December 2018, when 15 CTU-represented charters affiliated with the Acero chain won salary realignment with the CPS pay scale, reduced class size and a commitment to be sanctuary schools for undocumented immigrant students. But more often the C.O.R.E. leadership has sold out at the bargaining table, just as its bureaucratic predecessors did.

At bottom, the CTU/C.O.R.E.'s "social justice unionism" is simply a more activist version of simple labor militancy and "union democracy." It is incapable of taking on the capitalist state, or breaking with the Democratic Party, and is in fact subordinated to them. Yet those are the tasks at hand. As we wrote of the 2012 strike: "Only class-struggle unionism that openly fights against capitalism can defeat the class war on workers and the oppressed. The unions were built by 'reds' who relied on the working class not the employers and their government" (in "Chicago Teachers: Strike Was Huge, Settlement Sucks"). What's needed is to cohere a *class-struggle opposition to the class-collaborationist CTU bureaucrats*, to *break with the Democrats* and all capitalist parties and politicians, and build a *workers party fighting for a workers government*.

Next up: reopening the high schools. ■

<sup>10</sup> See "How the 'World Scab Web Site' Aids the Bosses," *The Internationalist* No. 62, January-March 2021

## Chicago Mayor Tries to Bully Teachers: “Show Up or Showdown”

In early January [2021], the lockout without pay of preschool and special education teachers and staff from remote learning platforms set the stage for the month-long standoff between the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and city rulers. Mayor Lori Lightfoot and her Chief Executive Officer of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), Janice Jackson, spurred on by notorious labor-haters, hammered the teachers union with unilateral orders to resume in-person learning. CPS officials claimed that “a collective failure to do so constitutes an illegal strike,” citing the no-strike clause in the contract coming out of the 2019 strike. They tried to pit students, parents and politicians against teachers. To no avail: less than one-fifth of the eligible students returned to school and 42 out of 50 members of the city council signed a statement opposing opening schools without an agreement with the CTU.

Fighting back, teachers set up tables in the frigid winter to teach remotely from their laptops outside schools and the school board president’s home. The union called for a series of measures including ventilation standards, vaccinations and accommodations. CTU president Jesse Sharkey added that reopening won’t work if “the district simply continues to dictate to us.” But Lightfoot threw down the gauntlet. The *Chicago Sun-Times* (22 January) summed up the city’s stance in a headline, “CPS to Teachers Union: Show Up or Showdown.” The CTU membership took up the challenge, voting to defy the city’s ultimatum. The union declared that “if CPS retaliates against members for exercising their right to a safe workplace” by teaching remotely, “all CTU members will stop working” on January 28 and “set up picket lines at their schools.”

A key issue in the dispute was safety protocols. Last fall, as the school year started, CPS claimed it had implemented a “comprehensive health and safety plan” in accordance with the “strongest available public health guidance.” Refuting this, teachers reported dirty vents, no floor signage, no disinfectant wipes, etc. One wrote: “It was obvious that my classroom was never ‘deep cleaned.’ For example, the students’ chairs still had crumbs and milk spills on them. The room was covered in a layer of dust.” And again: “When I was cleaning out my desk, it was full of rodent droppings” (CTU press release, 1 September 2020). Such filth is a threat to the health of teachers, staff and students alike, and an arbitrator ruled CPS schools are currently not “safe and healthful.” But the city said it didn’t have to bargain with the union over such issues.

There is a history to this. Under ex-mayor Rahm Emanuel, an avid CTU foe and Democratic Party privatizer, starting in 2014 cleaning and maintenance of CPS facilities were outsourced in a multi-million handout to the giant facilities management corporations Aramark and Sodexo, resulting in the firing of hundreds of union janitors. An investigative report in 2018 exposed rampant rodent and insect infestation, and last year CPS declared it would end its relationship with the two companies. Yet at the same time it handed them an even juicier \$460 million one-year contract

(*Chicago Sun-Times*, 22 May 2020)! Now CPS says it will hire 400 additional custodians, while the agreement requires that HEPA air purifiers be installed and includes a nine-page “Enhanced Routine Cleaning & Disinfection” program.

But who would trust Chicago Public Schools after past experience? That is why an important outcome of this struggle was the formation of predominantly union building-level COVID safety committees. These committees at every school are to be composed of four CTU members chosen by the union plus representatives from other unions in the building, in addition to the principal and building manager. They would have the power to “close down a classroom or potentially an entire building if safety standards are not being met.” Class-struggle unionists should use this opening to assert control of school reopening by teacher-student-parent-worker committees independent of the CPS educrats. Such union-led committees could insist on necessary safety measures and shut down unsafe operations.

Another key issue is class size. As noted earlier, this was not dealt with in the reopening agreement, except indirectly by requiring six-foot “social distancing” in classrooms, but even then, only “as much as possible.” Last July, a CTU document, *Same Storm, Different Boats: The Safe and Equitable Conditions for Reopening CPS in 2020-21*, called for “drastically reduced class sizes to no more than 12 per classroom.” That is crucial, both to safety in the pandemic and to effective education anytime, yet it was not dealt with in recent negotiations. Illinois labor law says this is off-limits for collective bargaining by Chicago teachers, but the CTU got around that in 2019 by insisting on agreement on issues like class size before bargaining over wages and hours. At that time, it established class size limits of 28-31 students.

As elementary and middle schools begin to reopen, school administrators will come face-to-face with the fact that they have a massive staffing shortage. CPS’ slap-dash response is to take on 1,000 part-time seasonal employees to babysit students. That is no answer. Now is the time for the CTU to insist that the city hire thousands of additional teachers (perhaps up to 10,000), reinstate union maintenance workers and find additional space to ensure that classes are no larger than 10-15 students, and stay that way. There are plenty of empty buildings and unemployed college graduates who could be recruited to union-supervised teacher training programs to make this possible. City officials will say they don’t have the money. A fighting union would reply: if you want the kids in school, find the dough. This is a class battle.

Not possible, pie in the sky? Like hell. After all, the capitalist rulers are shelling out hundreds of billions to bail out giant companies. With the active support of parents, students and school workers, in these trying times, the demand to hire needed educators could be won. But that requires a union leadership armed with a program of all-out class struggle, ready, willing and politically prepared to go up against capital, its parties and politicians, above all the Democrats. The CTU tops definitely are not. ■



## Remembering Edgar “Huracán” Ramírez (1947-2021)

# Bolivia: The Struggle for the Miners’ Archive

By Sándor John

*On 31 January 2021, longtime Bolivian labor activist Edgar “Huracán” Ramírez, who created and led the Miners’ Archive in the city of El Alto, died of COVID-19. His work building and defending the archive – a historical resource of great importance – was itself a dramatic story of struggle, coming after his decades as a union leader, target of rightist repression and political prisoner.*

*To those from diverse political currents and outlooks who, like him, saw the defense of historical memory as part of the class struggle, he offered not only invaluable and generous assistance but friendship and an inexhaustible store of anecdotes from the dramatic history of Bolivia’s working class.*

*Written after a rightist coup led to Ramírez’s dismissal from his post as archive director (he was reinstated after a campaign of protest), the following article touches on some aspects of his life, which was dramatically intertwined with the history of the Bolivia’s left and labor movement. It is reprinted from the Canadian labor history journal Labour/Le Travail, Fall 2020.*

\* \* \*

In late 2019, Bolivia’s first Indigenous president, Evo Morales, was toppled amid a wave of police mutinies and street demonstrations dominated by right-wing opposition leaders and civic associations. The dénouement came on 10 November, when the head of the armed forces – who, like many other officers involved in Morales’s ouster, was trained at the U.S. Army’s School of the Americas – called on the president to step down. Morales, together with vice-president Álvaro García Linera, took refuge in Mexico. A Christian fundamentalist senator, Jeanine Áñez, proclaimed herself president. *Le Monde*



Photo: courtesy of the author

**Longtime Bolivian labor activist Edgar “Huracán” Ramírez in the Miners’ Archive in El Alto, Bolivia, in 2016. Ramírez, a former mine workers leader, was fired as head of the archive by the rightist coup regime that took power in November 2019, but then reinstated after an outcry in Bolivia and internationally against the firing.. He died on 31 January 2021.**

*diplomatique* noted that Áñez has “surrounded herself with members of the military,” politicians with links to ultra-rightist anti-Indigenous groups, “and big employers’ representatives. None of them have been elected to the posts they hold.”<sup>1</sup> From Washington, president Donald Trump and his secretary of state Mike Pompeo hailed the events as a triumph for democracy.

The presidential palace that Áñez took over, as a uniformed soldier helped her don the presidential sash, is called the Palacio Quemado – the “Burnt Palace” – because it was set on fire in an 1875 coup attempt. As of now, counting last November’s takeover, Bolivia has had 189 coups.

<sup>1</sup> “Bolivia’s Coup,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, 18 December 2019. What came to be known as the “civic-police-military coup” had sought justification in allegations of irregularities in the October elections. These were endorsed by the Organization of American States, though that body, long known for the closeness of its alignment with U.S. policy, has “not brought forward the new, detailed documents it promised would prove electoral fraud” (“Bolivia’s Coup”).

## Bolivia and Historical Memory

An in-depth academic history of labour struggles at one of Bolivia's most famous mines is titled *The Power of Memory*.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps nowhere else in the hemisphere is it more vividly apparent than in Bolivia that how history is told is a question of power in the present and that the relation between collective memory and social power is never fixed in time, nor set in stone, or in the pages of books. There, as I kept seeing and learning anew in the course of my research – much of it carried out at the Miners' Archive – history keeps bursting from beneath the cobblestones and into the present.

"The Bible has returned to the palace," declared Áñez upon her installation in the Palacio Quemado. The statement harked back to her denunciation, as "Satanic," of the annual celebration of the Aymara New Year, which Morales had launched at the ruins of a pre-Inca site built seven centuries before the Spanish Conquest. For Bolivia's traditional elite, laying claim to the heritage of the conquistadors, and often to direct descent from them, was long a matter of pride. In recent years, more than a few were alarmed when Morales's speeches evoked a different legacy: that of Tupac Katari, the Aymara insurgent who, from his base in El Alto, laid siege to La Paz in 1781 and is said to have declared, before the Spanish authorities had him torn to pieces, "I will return, and I will be millions."

As for Simón Bolívar, for whom the country is named, *El Libertador*'s most famous brief for Latin American independence was a polemic over the facts and meaning of history, aimed at overturning Spain's claims to rule legitimately over its colonies.<sup>3</sup> After defeating the armies of the Crown, in 1825 he revisited the battlefield of memory, travelling to the city of Potosí to climb the "silver mountain" that had given the vanquished empire so much of its wealth and *raison d'être*.

A century later, as tin – a commodity now central to armaments production and provisioning for soldiers – replaced silver as the basis for Bolivia's economy, miners drawn from Quechua and Aymara villages began to take their place among the most militant working-class sectors in the world. Though still a minority of the population, they spearheaded the Bolivian Revolution of 1952.

After a new cycle of coups installed a series of rightist regimes in the 1960s and 1970s, one of Bolivia's most influential intellectuals noted that the proletariat of this plundered and impoverished nation had developed "the best historical sense of any of the continent's working classes."<sup>4</sup> The observation came as new struggles erupted against military dictator Hugo

Banzer, another School of the Americas graduate.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1980s, with neoliberalism sweeping the continent, privatization, mass layoffs, and mine closures decimated the workers' ranks. Yet, as I witnessed while researching a book on labour radicalism and the revolutionary Marxist movement in Bolivia, "history seemed to erupt through the earth's crust" in 2003 and 2005. In what came to be known as the Gas Wars, the *cascos café* – "brown helmets," as the miners are often known – occupied the front ranks "as workers and peasants faced off against the army and police in the colonial plazas of the capital." In the central square of La Paz, amid the sound of *cachorros* (dynamite blasts set off by miners), a retired miner told me, "The rich have stolen everything from us, all the way back to the Age of Silver" under the Spanish. Across town, an orator cried out "Remember the Tupac Katari rebellion!" as he evoked the pre-Inca deity of abundance, Ekeko, in a speech on the need for city-dwellers to back the Indigenous peasant insurgents then flooding into the city.<sup>6</sup>

The rebellion of 2003-05 overthrew two presidents, one of them the country's biggest mine owner, the other its preeminent historian. Channelling that upheaval into the renewal of state institutions through an "orderly transition," Morales won the special presidential elections of December 2005, with a landslide vote for his Indigenist-populist Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS – Movement Toward Socialism). Early the next year, he was sworn in, as the country's first Indigenous president. The new administration was part of the "pink tide" of Latin American governments elected amid widespread repudiation of the neoliberal Washington consensus.<sup>7</sup>

In the years preceding Morales's election, the MAS built on his original base among peasant unionists in the department (province) of Cochabamba. Defending their right to grow the coca leaf widely consumed by Bolivia's labouring poor, the party developed a reputation for opposing U.S.-backed administrations. (In the prior elections, in 2002, the U.S. ambassador went so far as to explicitly warn Bolivians not to vote for Morales.) Partly as a strategic decision given early competition from Aymara nationalists, the MAS also increasingly sought to identify itself with cultural, linguistic, historical, and symbolic aspects of resistance to the oppression of the Indigenous majority that had characterized the country from its inception.

A political and economic balance sheet of Morales's thirteen years in office would be outside the scope of this brief presentation, but it is important to note that the underpinnings of the *status quo ante* remained unbroken. Its name notwithstanding,

<sup>2</sup> Magdalena Cajías de la Vega, *El poder de la memoria: La mina de Huanuni en la historia del movimiento minero y la minería del año 1900-2010* (La Paz: Plural Editores, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Simón Bolívar, "The Jamaica Letter: Response of a South American to a Gentleman from This Island" (6 September 1815), in *El Libertador: Writings of Simón Bolívar*, ed. David Bushnell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6-31.

<sup>4</sup> René Zavaleta Mercado, *El poder dual en América Latina* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1974), 84.

<sup>5</sup> Banzer was inducted into the school's Hall of Fame in 1988. See Leslie Gill, *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 78.

<sup>6</sup> S. Sándor John, *Bolivia's Radical Tradition: Permanent Revolution in the Andes* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 13-14.

<sup>7</sup> A vivid glimpse of how the Washington consensus had been promoted in Bolivia is provided by the documentary *Our Brand Is Crisis* (Rachel Boynton, dir., Koch Lorber Films, 2005). It features Clinton-aligned election strategist James Carville, who in 2002 ran the re-election campaign for President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, the U.S.-educated mining magnate who wound up being driven from the presidency, and the country, the following year.



Photo: courtesy of the author



**Photo displayed at Miners' Archive of Bolivian women workers in a mine, wearing traditional *pollera* skirts, which the racist 2019 coup regime banned public employees from wearing.**

the MAS pledged from the beginning of its administration to promote an “Andean and Amazonian capitalism.” The agribusiness magnates who dominate the country’s eastern departments, mainstays of the hardline right, retained their property and power. Meanwhile, as he has stated, Morales “boosted” the armed forces, which were given munificent funding and praise as allegedly inseparable from the people.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, anti-Indigenous rightists were enraged by the rise of Aymara and Quechua administrators, entrepreneurs, and intellectual and cultural figures, and by what U.S.-backed fundamentalist politicians saw as challenges to traditional “white Christian” hegemony.

In the weeks following Morales’s ouster, police and army

<sup>8</sup> “Morales asegura que se arrepiente de haber potenciado a las FFAA cuando era presidente,” *Los Tiempos* (Cochabamba), 17 December 2019. Internationally notorious for its coups and massacres, Bolivia’s military was smashed by armed workers in the 1952 Revolution. The nationalist regime that came to power then rebuilt it with U.S. training, dollars, and weapons. After the Cuban Revolution, “Bolivia became a laboratory to test ... the new role Latin American militaries might play” in Washington’s efforts to ensure a “friendly” hemisphere, with the United States training entire graduating classes from Bolivia’s military academy. Kenneth D. Lehman, *Bolivia and the United States: A Limited Partnership* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 150-151.

troops killed 36 unarmed protesters in two massacres, on 15 and 19 November, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Others were “disappeared,” while the new regime launched arrests and threats against “seditious” journalists. The commission also noted an outbreak of “acts of racism and discrimination,” particularly “murders, beatings, wounding and humiliation” of Indigenous women known as *mujeres de pollera* because of the distinctive pleated skirts (*polleras*) they traditionally wear.<sup>9</sup> In late November, “public administration” employees were banned from wearing *polleras*, ponchos, and other clothing associated with Indigenous culture.

This followed burnings of the Indigenous movement’s multicoloured *wiphala* flag by supporters of ultra-rightist Santa Cruz businessman and paramilitary leader Fernando Camacho, a close ally of the new administration. Police had also cut *wiphala* patches off their uniforms in the course of the coup. Though its precise origins are contested, the *wiphala* banner is raised in homage to the civilizations subjected by the Spanish Conquest and to the present-day struggles of their living descendants. As contention over collective memory entwines with issues of power in the present, even such symbolic evocations can be demonized as newly seditious, to be exorcised in new *autos-da-fé*.<sup>10</sup>

### The Miners’ Archive

We do not normally think of archivists as people engaged in a heroic adventure. In Bolivia, they are. On the windswept *altiplano* (high plateau) in El Alto, beginning in the year 2000, former mine workers took the lead in rescuing their history.

For centuries, Bolivia’s mines generated fabulous wealth, untold misery, and examples of struggle and sacrifice renowned throughout the world. They also produced a history full of secrets and revelations. A central part of that history was rescued, in a physically literal sense, at the Archive of the Bolivian Mining Company (Comibol), the state enterprise formed after mines were nationalized in the Bolivian Revolution of 1952. When most state-owned mines were shut in the privatization frenzy of the 1980s and 1990s, Comibol was gutted. Its archives were, again quite literally, consigned to the scrap heap of history.

“After we started work here in 2000, we discovered that two entire truckloads of documents had been shipped off to a toilet paper factory,” archive director Edgar (“Huracán”) Ramírez told me during one of my first visits to the site, where I was looking for documents about a famous meeting of the miners’ union (FSTMB) in the town of Pulacayo. “An investigation found that this had already happened a number of times,” added the former miner and labour leader from Potosí.

<sup>9</sup> “CIDH: Observaciones preliminares tras su visita a Bolivia,” Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 10 December 2019.

<sup>10</sup> New presidential elections were eventually held in October 2020, in which coup backer Camacho and ex-president Carlos Mesa lost to MAS candidate Luis Arce.

Staff members display “before and after” photos, with a mixture of indignation and pride. Before: precious documents left in barrels, piles, and dumping grounds, exposed to the elements, soaked in water, stained with rust and dirt. After: rescued archival materials arranged on shelves that the workers built from old doors, crates, and scrap wood. As for nails, “we got them the old-fashioned way, by gathering old rusty ones from the ground and resharpening them by hand,” noted archive warehouseman Freddy Aguilar.

Under Ramírez’s direction, his fellow former mine workers began the labour of classifying documents by enterprise, mine, historical period, and subject. The staff worked to “safeguard these elements of the nation’s memory,” in the words of Carola Campos, the archive’s technical director. The three largest categories correspond to the mining empires created by Bolivia’s pre-Revolution “tin barons”: José Avelino Aramayo (1809-82), Simón Patiño (1860-1947), and Mauricio Hochschild (1881-1965). Aramayo was among the first to realize that the mines of Potosí – the “rich mountain” whose name had been a synonym for silver in colonial times – were a lucrative source of a more prosaic metal: tin. The fortunes of this malleable substance were linked to war, as it was used for munitions as well as canned (“tinned”) food for soldiers. In an old Aramayo Company warehouse in El Alto, the Comibol Archive got its start.

For his part, Simón Patiño was “undoubtedly the greatest South American industrialist of his or previous generations.”<sup>11</sup> In the decades before the 1952 Revolution, Patiño became world-famous as one of the wealthiest men on earth, with a yearly income said to exceed Bolivia’s national budget. The third tin baron was Mauricio (Moritz) Hochschild, whose German Jewish background made him an early target of nationalist agitation. Today his descendant Adam Hochschild is known as the author of *King Leopold’s Ghost*, a history of the Belgian Congo, where it was not tin but rubber that the horrors of empire coined into gold.

At the Miners’ Archive, a crucial project has been “the classification of the Hochschild Archive,” archivist and historian Carlos Tenorio told me. Among this collection’s curiosities is the elaborate private code that the Hochschild company used for its internal telegrams. The code is one of an endless number of secrets dug up by the archive miners. Another is a 1937 contract in which Patiño Mines hired the legal services of a young lawyer named Víctor Paz Estenssoro, who a few years later became “El Jefe” of Bolivia’s Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR), which would subsequently take power in the 1952 Revolution.

On a shelf nearby, one may consult a document listing the precise amounts that the Patiño firm paid to transport and feed government troops in the infamous Uncía mine massacre of 1923, an event often cited as the spark for the country’s 20th-century labour radicalization. Then there are the reports sent by company spies and government agents, pointing out which miners they considered it most important to fire for “subversive” union and political activities, in the innumerable

waves of repression against Bolivian labour.

One of those who experienced that history first-hand, going back to the 1960s, is archive director Edgar Ramírez. Born and raised in Potosí, he worked as a perforator at the Unificada mine from 1969 to 1994, when the mine was closed under the notorious Presidential Decree 21060, which aimed to destroy the miners’ movement while privatizing state enterprises and making union activity in the private sector as difficult as possible. Ramírez’s work in the mine was repeatedly interrupted by firings, imprisonment, exile, and periods of clandestinity as a leader of the FSTMB and the COB labor federation.

The dates of these episodes track “milestones” of repression in Bolivia’s history, including 1965 (the junta of General René Barrientos, one of Lyndon Johnson’s favourites); 1971, 1976, and 1978 (General Hugo Banzer’s dictatorship); 1980-81 (Colonel Luis García Meza’s “narco-junta”); and 1994 (under Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, the U.S.-trained mine magnate featured in *Our Brand Is Crisis*).

In 1997, Ramírez – often known as “Huracán” (Hurricane) – was transferred to the Mutún iron mines, “where the workers were abandoned and the damp of the mountains had invaded all the structures of the enterprise,” a friend relates. “It was really a new kind of exile which Banzer [who had returned to power] condemned him to. In that desolation, abandoned and alone, he contracted a chronic liver disease which brought him to the verge of death.” A decade later he suffered a near-fatal relapse.

In 2000, Ramírez was sent to work as a warehouseman at the archive of Comibol, the government mining company. He found it in a state of near collapse, discovering that it had been subjected to what he calls “a process of strangulation” since the mid-1980s, as a result of the privatization decrees. During one of our discussions in the drafty wooden warehouse where records were stored before the archive moved to its current, brick-and-cement location, he noted,

“At one time, the Archive had an infrastructure and qualified personnel. All of that suffered a first blow with the decision to remove the personnel and put in some former mine engineers and others who knew nothing of archives. This is where the actual destruction began. Then Comibol decided to sell off all its buildings, like its headquarters, which had formerly



**A few of the documents that miners rescued after Bolivian Mining Company dumped them as trash.**

<sup>11</sup> Charles F. Geddes, *Patiño: The Tin King* (London: Robert Hale, 1972), page 11.



been the Patiño Mines headquarters, as well as the Archive itself. From 1993 to 1995, the company rented dump trucks and they brought mountains of paper up here and dumped them out into the patio as if they were sand, gravel or trash, under an improvised roof.

“Then came another phase when the company [supposedly to make up for these actions – Ed.] got half a million dollars from the World Bank to organize a so-called documentation center, with library technicians. They said they organized 47,000 files, which amounts to less than 300 linear metres of documents – when we have [tens of] kilometres of documents here! It boiled down to the World Bank giving that half million not to organize a documentation center but to destroy an archive.”

Because history can be dangerous, the powerful often seek to reshape it in their image, or bury it entirely. Thus, the team of former miners that Ramírez eventually put together had to begin by digging anew into mountains, this time made of paper, to rescue documents of a history that it was up to them to defend.

Mobilizing their experience as organizers, they sorted and ordered papers that they saw as more precious than any metal and made them a home from scratch. Then they had to defend the archive, not only against attempts to remove its contents yet again but also against the material constraints of life on the impoverished, harsh yet beautiful *altiplano*. After years of struggle, the new building was specially constructed to better house the documents.

Because of the ex-miners’ efforts, among the old papers we have the privilege of smelling the *copagira* (mineral-laden mine water), hearing the *cachorros* (dynamite blasts), and tracing the veins of a proletarian, Indigenous, rebellious history.

### Memory’s Persistence

In early December 2019, news reached me that Comibol had fired Ramírez. Historians, archivists, writers, and filmmakers, together with labour-movement veterans, began spreading the word, calling for the 72-year-old former political prisoner



Miners’ Archive

**Workers restoring and classifying materials documenting history of the heroic Bolivian miners.**

and labour leader to be reinstated in his post.

Then, on 11 December [2019], the Bolivian media reported on a government press conference in which the vice-minister of coordination stated that Comibol’s dismissal of Ramírez had been “an error” and that he was being reinstated as director of the archive. In a posting on “the battle in defence of the archives,” Luis Oporto, head of Bolivia’s Library of Congress and a prominent voice in defence of Ramírez and the Miners’ Archive, stated, “Many thanks to the *compañeros* and *compañeras*, archivists here in Bolivia and around the world, to journalists who followed this situation closely, to the academics and intellectuals, as well as the cultural and academic institutions which offered us the support we needed in this crucial time for the defence of Bolivia’s archives.”

The Miners’ Archive remains little known outside Bolivia. Yet the story of its creation is part of the legacy of struggle and sacrifice by Bolivia’s predominantly Indigenous working people and a vital contribution to collective memory by and for the working class, and for historians the world over. ■

# Bolivia: Education and Revolution

## A Review

*Elsa Cladera de Bravo: Maestra de profesión y revolución* (CIMA [La Paz], 2013)

By Elsa Nadezhda Bravo Cladera

“*Teacher By Profession, Teacher of Revolution*”: the subtitle of this biography conveys why many readers of *Marxism & Education* would have a sense of kinship with its subject, Bolivian teachers leader Elsa Cladera de Bravo (1922–2005). A story of class struggle and organizing in the face of decades of repression and exile, it’s a far cry from the “labor statesmanship” preached by U.S. union tops. For Cladera, “the path of liberation” – for workers, for women, for the peoples of Latin America under the boot of U.S. imperialism – was “the fight for socialism,” as she stressed in a speech to Italian trade unionists after the 1971 Bolivian military coup forced her to flee clandestinely to Chile, and the 1973 Chilean coup then drove her into European exile.

Elsa Cladera was born into a prominent family in the city of Oruro, a center of the tin-mining industry that dominated Bolivia for most of the 20th century. During her childhood, the defeat of Bolivia in the horrific Chaco War (1932–35), which the rightist regime had launched against neighboring Paraguay, led to extensive radicalization and the growth of the militant mine workers movement. As a secondary school student, she began participating in circles of young left-wing activists in Oruro. A key episode occurred in 1942, when a university student named Fernando Bravo, a former Chaco War medic, led a demonstration against the army officer who had carried out the infamous Catavi Massacre of striking miners. When police rushed in trying to arrest Bravo, Cladera helped him escape.

The young revolutionaries would marry the following year, and had three daughters: Nadezhda, the author of this book (named after the teacher and Bolshevik organizer Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s companion), Bolshia (for

“Bolshevik”) and Alexandra (named after Bolshevik theorist of women’s liberation Alexandra Kollontai). Already as a young man, Fernando would become one of the best-known representatives of the Partido Obrero Revolucionario (POR – Revolutionary Workers Party) and soon a central figure in the Bolivian Trotskyist movement.<sup>1</sup> In Oruro during the 1952 revolution’s “April Days” of mass insurrection, he helped lead miners and students in combat against the armed forces of the old regime.

In the late ’50s the Bravos moved to La Paz, where they both worked as teachers. Though Elsa was not a member of the POR, she participated actively in many of its activities. Above all, she became an activist and leader in the militant union of the capital region’s union of education workers. During this period, following orders from U.S. imperialism and the International Monetary Fund, the bourgeois-nationalist government of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) launched a vicious crackdown against the labor movement. When it decreed a state of siege against the 1959 teachers strike for higher pay, sending the MNR’s infamous “Political Control” agents to raid the union’s headquarters, Elsa Cladera was among those arrested.

Unbowed by this repression, the teachers launched a major strike in 1962 that is the context for one of the most vivid parts of this book. As president of the Strike Committee, Fernando Bravo was the central leader of this struggle. As Elsa later wrote:

“During this strike, he introduced new methods of struggle, such as the ‘lightning meetings’ that were held in working-class neighborhoods and throughout the city. The objective was to incorporate the population into support for the teachers strike, that is, to link the strike to the population itself. The success of the strike was largely due to this social connection.”<sup>2</sup>

The “lightning meetings” were short, unannounced rallies in which “action groups” of teachers would gather in one part of the city, give speeches and distribute fliers, then disperse, only to have another group do the same thing in another part of town. As Elsa’s biographer explains, “This made it possible to evade repression by the police, who didn’t know where the different groups were going to show up and couldn’t be present at all the locations where these ‘rallies’ occurred.” Fernando Bravo was ill when the strike began, and during it his health declined drastically; he died in November 1962 at the age of 50.

In 1964, Elsa Cladera was elected Labor Liaison Secretary for the La Paz teachers union, a post that involved intensive coordination with blue-collar sectors of the powerful COB (Central Obrera Boliviana) labor federation, in which Bolivia’s miners played a central role. It was largely with the aim of breaking this proletarian power that at the end of that

year, a U.S.-backed military dictatorship was installed under General René Barrientos. The COB and its constituent unions were repressed, with labor and left leaders imprisoned, sent to internment camps in the jungle, or driven into exile. Heroic labor leaders, among them the miners’ César Lora and Isaac Camacho, organized “clandestine unions” to lead the workers’ resistance. Defying the junta, by 1967 teachers were carrying out mass mobilizations, and in 1968 Elsa Cladera, as Secretary of the Clandestine Unions of the La Paz regional labor federation, helped lead a May Day march in the capital.

In mid-1970, Bolivian teachers’ resistance to poverty wages under the military regime led to a nationwide strike. Told to meet with then-dictator General Alfredo Ovando in order to reach a settlement, teachers’ representatives buckled when he made a small, partial concession to their demands. The one voice rejecting the “unanimous” vote was that of La Paz teachers spokeswoman Elsa Cladera, who declared: “Mr. President, La Paz rejects the agreement.” The next day, a general assembly of Bolivia’s striking teachers voted to “reject the agreement [that was] signed with the government,” to “continue the strike” and “disown (recall) all the leaders who signed the agreement,” while maintaining Elsa in her post. In the face of this, the government backed down.

Yet after a brief interregnum, in August 1971 the hard-line dictatorship of General Hugo Banzer was installed in yet another coup. In La Paz, the university was bombed while throughout the country labor, left and student leaders were rounded up, as terror squads of ultra-rightists and torture specialists backed up the army. Elsa Cladera’s daughters were imprisoned, and she went into hiding. Months passed, until she was able to arrange a highly dangerous trip to the border, where at night in an area where discovery could have meant on-the-spot execution, she was able to cross into Chile, where in early 1972 the Unidad Popular government of Salvador Allende gave her political asylum.

From Chile she wrote her family describing the increasing social polarization, in which the U.S.-financed “right wing does not rest” while the workers were unarmed militarily and politically disarmed by the popular front. Its slogan “The People United Will Never Be Defeated” meant “uniting” the workers with their exploiters and the military officialdom, which seized power in the coup of September 1973. “We didn’t think we would go so quickly from experiencing one military coup to another,” Cladera would later tell a Swiss newspaper, adding: “The Pinochet coup meant our very existence was once again in question.”

Survival meant flight into a new exile, this time in Switzerland. Other family members would eventually gain refuge (mainly in Sweden), and in Europe Elsa found opportunities to give presentations and speeches on the situation in Latin America. Still, as for so many other refugees and exiles, living in a distant land posed many hardships. While the last part of the book recounts these, what we are left with above all is a moving depiction of this courageous comrade who never gave up the fight, for education and revolution. ■

– Sándor John

<sup>1</sup> On the history of Bolivian Trotskyism (including its eventual division between the wing led by Guillermo Lora and that led by Bravo and Hugo González), see my *Bolivia’s Radical Tradition: Permanent Revolution in the Andes* (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Biographical sketch of Fernando Bravo, quoted in *Elsa Cladera de Bravo*, p. 70.



# Marxism, Education and Women's Liberation

By Cecília

*The following is a contribution by a Brazilian comrade prepared for the conference on "Communism as Horizon," held in Havana, Cuba in November 2019. Unfortunately, she was unable to attend the conference because of travel regulations, but a Spanish translation was read to the conference by a comrade from Mexico.*

Good morning. I am Cecilia, from Brazil, a teacher in the state education system of Rio de Janeiro, and I am part of the collective leadership of the Sindicato Estadual dos Profissionais da Educação (SEPE-RJ, State Union of Education Professionals) of the state of Rio. I am also a member of the Class Struggle Caucus, which puts forward a revolutionary perspective in the trade-union sphere.

It is a great pride to be in a country that has the merit, due to its Revolution, of having ended illiteracy and being considered, right up to today, the country that has the best education in Latin America. It will be my mission to take back to my country, my organization, and my union all the knowledge that I will learn here of the advances that Cuba has made since the beginning of the Revolution, especially in health and education. I hope that with this event of historical importance we can influence each other's minds and hearts to learn the necessity of revolutionary processes for the liberation of humanity from the capitalist yoke....

My theme is "Marxism, Education and Women's Liberation." It is a very opportune and contemporary theme, but one that poses a great challenge, showing advances, albeit insufficient, which I hope to be able to analyze, even as the oppression of women has tallied up alarming numbers in this

capitalist system. The industrial revolution and its fantastic advances in technology that has offered us, for example, the washing machine and the refrigerator, has not, however, been able to remove the immense burden of suffering from the stooped shoulders of women. So we will have to continue to address this issue many times over.

My country, for example, has lamentably been a champion in aggression against women, who make up the majority in the working class and in the general population. However, the oppression of women goes back a long way, is all-sided and international, for as the utopian socialist Charles Fourier said: "The degree of emancipation of women is the natural measure of the general emancipation." But while other indictments and theories left many gaps, Marxism best described the oppression and exploitation of women in its broadest dimensions. Above all it gave a historical and materialist analysis of their subjugation.

Take for example, what Karl Marx's comrade Friedrich Engels wrote about this in his brilliant book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. There he analyzed that since the primitive era when men acquired wealth and property, women lost their most important rights and became subjugated. Engels points out that "such a revolution was one of the most profound that history has ever known," in a negative sense, and that "the overthrow of mother-right was the world-historic defeat of the female sex." He added that "This degraded position of the woman ... has gradually been palliated and glossed over, and sometimes clothed in a milder form; in no sense has it been abolished."

This subjugation persists to this day in the capitalist world. But by locating the origins of women's oppression in the introduction of private property, Engels also indicates the only way to overcome it, namely the liberation of women through socialist revolution. Only in this way can the material basis be established, with the socialization of production and the growth of abundance with the international extension of the revolution, to replace domestic chores, or what Lenin called the domestic slavery of women, with high quality voluntary social institutions.

It should be noted that, once again, Marxism triumphed over other theories, as shown when it was applied in an unprecedented manner by the Bolshevik Party in the October Revolution of 1917

Liborio Novai



**Literacy teachers holding huge pencils in victory march of Cuba's historic campaign to eliminate illiteracy, 21 December 1961. Free universal education, medical care are among key gains of revolution that overthrew capitalist rule.**



**Friedrich Engels, whose work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) laid out the materialist analysis of the roots of women's oppression.**

in Russia. Nowhere else in the world have women had more far-reaching social conquests. It is well known that the Russian Revolution began on 8 March 1917, when women textile workers began a strike “for bread and peace,” which brought out more than 90,000 male and female workers. And it resulted seven months later in the soviets taking power, under Bolshevik leadership, in the October Revolution, which gave birth to the first workers state in history.

The young Soviet republic immediately legalized abortion and divorce, established legal equality for women, and more importantly began to build the economic foundations that would make women's liberation possible (daycare centers, restaurants, collective laundries). Also, Soviet Russia was the first country to abolish the backward laws against homosexuality. The Communist International adopted the Bolsheviks' practice of creating special bodies for work among women, to win the best female fighters for the revolutionary cause.

What is less known about this history is all the preparatory work done by the Bolshevik women leaders who were themselves great revolutionary fighters, among them Alexandra Kollontai, who wrote crucial Marxist texts such as “The Social Foundations of the Woman Question” and “Communism and the Family,” along with other texts published in the journal *Rabotnitsa*, or The Woman Worker. Another of these communist leaders was Nadezhda Krupskaya. She is remembered primarily as Lenin's companion, but she was also an educator. Indeed, the subject of Marxism and education was one of her main interests. In the period before the Revolution she made

a study of the leading educational reformers, which was published in the early months of 1917 under the title *Democracy and Public Education*.

Following the seizure of power, Krupskaya together with Anatoli Lunacharsky, was one of the main leaders responsible for the educational policy guidelines of the then People's Commissariat for Enlightenment, the Narkompros. A couple of years ago, a book titled *The Construction of Socialist Pedagogy*, containing a collection of 24 texts by Krupskaya, was published for the first time in Brazil. This book shows all the challenges faced by those who formulated and built socialist pedagogy along with the teachers, to create through their practice a new school destined to train fighters and builders of the future opened by the Revolution. One of the first texts of the living thought of this great revolutionary, “Concerning the Question of Socialist Schools” (1918), explains:

“In serving the interests of the masses the government of workers and peasants must break the schools' class character and make schools at all levels accessible to all sections of the population. It must do this not in words but in deeds.” The purpose of the school would be to educate “people who are prepared both in theory and in practice to undertake all types of labor, both physical and mental, and who are able to construct a meaningful, rational, beautiful and happy life in society. Such people are needed in a socialist society, for without them socialism cannot be fully achieved”<sup>1</sup>

However, in the same text, Krupskaya insists, “Socialist schools are conceivable only in specific social conditions, for they are made socialist not by the fact that they are directed by socialists but by the fact that their objectives correspond to the needs of a socialist society.” And “since socialist schools could not be viable institutions in a capitalist system, they could at best only be interesting pedagogical experiments.” Here is an expression of the fundamental truth elucidated by Karl Marx in his manuscript, *The German Ideology*, from the year 1847: “The ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas of every age.”

We are discussing in this conference the theme, “Communism as the Horizon,” and that materialist principle of Marx is fundamental for us as educators in the capitalist system. It explains that there are limits to what we can do in the narrow confines of the classroom, that our struggle for education and the interests of the workers and the oppressed has to pass through the struggle in the street, in the factory, in the fields and in the schools to bring about socialist revolution. This revolution has to be international, and internationalist.

As Lenin said, theory must be a guide for action. That is why I want to talk a little about some practical realities of the current class struggle on the question of education. In Brazil, many teachers dreamed of a liberating education, but today we are living, in a brutal form, the revenge of the bourgeois ruling

<sup>1</sup> An excerpted version of this article by Krupskaya is printed in *The Internationalist* special issue on “Marxism and the Battle Over Education” (2nd edition, 2008), which is available on the Internet at <http://www.internationalist.org/intmarxedutoc.html>.





**Nadezhda Krupskaya addressing Red Army soldiers.**

class determined to impose its ideas – that is, its oppressive dogmas – in the school.

The instrument is a bill called “*Escola Sem Partido*” (Schools Without Parties), which expresses the policy of the reactionary bonapartist government of Jair Messias Bolsonaro. But even before being approved by Congress, the effects of this law are already being felt. Teachers are turned in by students to school authorities and politicians for supposedly “ideologizing” education, for introducing Marxism, and for this “offense” they are fired, which creates an atmosphere of fear and dread in the classrooms. This is the chilling actuality, but what I want to explain and underline, is that this control of the content of public education by the bourgeoisie has already been imposed by previous, popular-front governments, which claimed to be progressive.

Now, the liberation of women is closely related to the question of education. First of all, there is exclusion. In all capitalist countries there has been great resistance to the entry of women into higher education. In Brazil there persists up until today an “integralist” current (this was the name of the fascist party in the 1930s), encompassing fascists and monarchists, called Tradition, Family and Property, which opposes public education in general, and of young women in particular.

But exclusion is not only formal. A report released by UNICEF (the United Nations Children’s Fund) says that one in seven adolescents in Brazil is out of school. Among the reasons for dropping out of school in Brazil, the report points to two situations: the need to work and pregnancy. Among young women, about 28% of female students between 12 and 17 years old stopped attending classes because they were pregnant.

Facing the serious problem of early pregnancy, Marxist teachers have been fighting

for the SEPE-RJ, the largest union with a majority of women in the state, which serves around 3,000 schools with 2 million students, to provide information about abortion, a topic of great sensitivity and primary importance for young women from marginalized neighborhoods.

The fight for the right to free abortion is made more difficult by the actions of the state that seeks to criminalize it. I was a representative of my union in a public hearing in the City Council of Volta Redonda to denounce the absence of proper medical conditions and the unsanitary situations in which abortion is practiced, which at present, due to the absence of such conditions, causes the deaths of thousands of women.

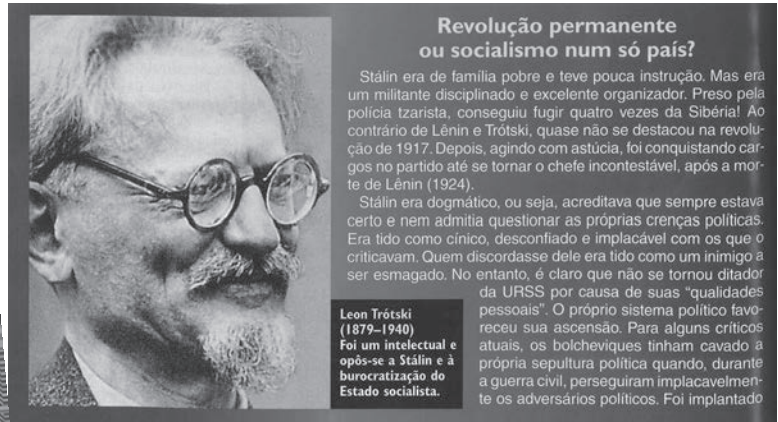
So, we emphasize, we cannot defend our students, ensure that they have a future outside the home, without fighting for the abolition of all laws against the right to abortion, laws that are supported in Congress by all the powerful reactionary caucuses – the Bible Caucus (i.e., religious fundamentalists), the Beef Caucus (representing agribusinesses) and the Bullet Caucus (supporters of the police and the military) – but also by a large part of the popular-front caucus.

We are also fighting, as I said, against the conservative project of imposing a supposedly apolitical school, which does not stimulate critical thinking and limits teachers. Not only this, the bill also plans to eliminate all teaching on gender issues, and all sex education. Its origin dates back to 2014, when Rio de Janeiro state deputy Flávio Bolsonaro suggested to the creator and coordinator of the Schools Without Parties move-



Comitê de Luta Classista

**Comitê de Luta Classista and the Liga Quarta-Internacionalista do Brasil in August 2018 called free abortion on demand and for women’s liberation through socialist revolution.**



**New Critical History, 8th grade edition, has an extensive chapter on the 1917 Russian Revolution, including a discussion of the programmatic differences between Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution and Stalin's dogma of building "socialism in one country." The textbook was removed, not by the rightist-bonapartist Bolsonaro but by the popular-front government of Lula.**

ment, Miguel Nagib, at that time a São Paulo state prosecutor, the drafting of a bill to make it official policy.

Flávio Bolsonaro is the son of the current president Jair Bolsonaro, who, among several measures attacking progressive education, announced cuts of up to 30% in the budgets of three federal universities. This measure generated a huge protest, thousands of students and teachers demonstrated on May 15 (2019) in several cities in Brazil against cuts in the education budget.

This Schools Without Party project seeks to impose anti-communist prejudices in schools and to extirpate all activism from the teaching profession. This is why it is known as the "Gag Law," that is, a law whose objective is to silence us as education workers. But much earlier, the same political forces unleashed a hysteria against a textbook, *A nova história crítica* (New Critical History), written by Mario Schmidt, who was at that time a teacher in Niterói, in the state of Rio de Janeiro. I have here a copy of the 2000 edition for 8th graders. There were also editions for 5th, 6th and 7th graders, and a concentrated volume for high school. It was very popular. The publisher wrote that it was "the biggest success of the educational publishing market in the last 500 years". The books were used by 30 million students. Students and teachers loved them.

It's easy to understand why. It has lots of pictures and graphics (which was one of the complaints of the textbook censors). It is written in a popular style. But most of all, it dealt with many subjects normally silenced by textbooks, notably political doctrines. In addressing the subject of World War I, the author of the book writes about monopoly capitalism, about imperialism, the disputes over markets, the massacres. He has it all, Einstein, Freud, Hollywood, German Nazism, Italian Fascism.

On the Russian Revolution, it not only repeats the dates,

but also analyzes the 1905 Revolution, the division between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. It has pictures about Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, a discussion of "Permanent Revolution or Socialism in One Country". He mentions the communists in Brazil, the march of the Prestes Column in the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> On the Cuban Revolution he has several pages, writing: "Cuba is a poor country that achieved good results in education and health. Why has Brazil, which has a more industrialized economy and a higher per capita income than Cuba, not yet achieved these results?"

Not surprisingly, such statements and questioning have been denounced by rightist sectors as "Marxist indoctrination." I don't agree with all of the author's analysis, he has a left-wing social democratic viewpoint perhaps, but he is quite objective and offers material for debate. That is what the new inquisitors object to. In its place they want to introduce the common anti-communist ideology of traditional textbooks. It is not surprising either that Schmidt's books were withdrawn by the Ministry of Education and Culture. However, they were banned not in 2019 by Bolsonaro's government, but in 2007 under the popular-front government, yielding to right-wing pressures.

To conclude: Marx was right. The ideas of the ruling class, in our case in Brazil of the bourgeois class, are the dominant ideas in capitalist society, under governments of the right and the left. Even before the arrival of the current president to the

<sup>2</sup> In 1925-27, a "lieutenants' revolt" by young army officers led by Captain Luis Carlos Prestes rose against the oligarchic Old Republic broke out at a fort in São Paulo, Brazil's largest city. After several weeks of heavy fighting, the rebels retreated to the countryside, where they were joined by some hundreds of civilians and other soldiers. Thousands of government soldiers pursued the Prestes Column for 14,000 miles over three years through Brazil's backlands from south to to west to north and back, but never managed to capture or defeat the rebels, who went into exile in Bolivia. Prestes became the long-time leader of the (Stalinist) Brazilian Communist Party.



Palácio do Planalto (Brazil's White House), accusations against teachers and official inquiries were multiplying. An extensive report on the Internet Group portal was entitled, "From Fear to Self-Censorship: Symptoms Show That *Escola Sem Partido* Has Become 'Law'" (iG, 1 June 2019), with many examples of how the bans are preventing any discussion about racism or the oppression of women.

Today the dilemma is posed: how to teach the liberating goals of communism where this is strictly forbidden? Good question. Part of the answer is that education is a democratic right, not even a socialist right per se, but it is under attack by the bourgeoisie around the world, in part because they want education to exist only as a commodity, to serve only to generate profits. But I believe, as part of this theme of the communist horizon, that it must be very clear that we can only defend this same fundamental democratic right to education for the exploited and oppressed masses in Brazil and around the world with a class-struggle program.

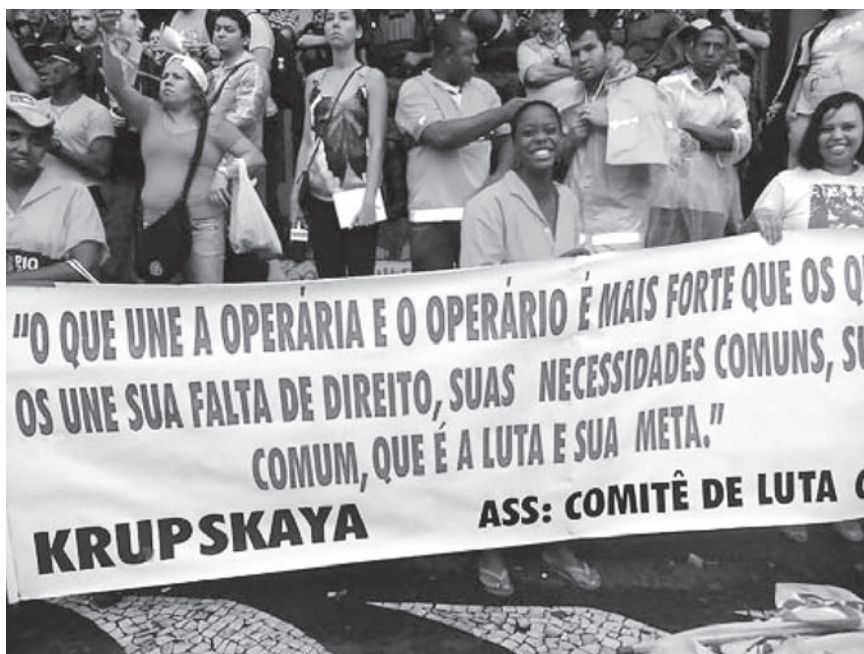
As a Marxist, I bring revolutionary ideas to my union, the Sindicato Estadual dos Profissionais da Educação do Rio de Janeiro, Sepe-RJ, when fighting the authoritarian schemes of the government. We fight for schools to be governed by councils of teachers, students, parents and workers. We call this organization quadripartite school government, as was practiced in the young Soviet republic.

The key is to integrate the teachers' struggle with other sectors that have social power, fighting for transitional demands that confront the limits of capitalism. We have expressed and practiced our solidarity with the Mexican teachers, especially the militant teachers from the state of Oaxaca, who have combined their struggle with the defense of the indigenous peoples. We in Volta Redonda, the "City of Steel", have always looked to mobilize the metal workers, who are fighting for the six-hour work day.

We support the students and parents. One example was our victorious struggle to prevent the imposition of an exclusionary exam in the public schools of the state of Rio de Janeiro (the SAERJ), which would have severely limited the access of students from poor families to higher education institutions.<sup>3</sup> Also, in 2015-16, teachers, students, and staff managed to thwart a government attempt to drastically reduce the number of classrooms in public schools by fighting shoulder to shoulder with the students who occupied the schools.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See "Teachers in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil Stop Work to Stop High Stakes Test," *The Internationalist* special issue, June 2012.

<sup>4</sup> See "Student Revolt Shakes São Paulo, Brazil," in *Marxism & Education* No. 5, Summer 2018.



**Comitê de Luta Classista banner in International Women's Day march, 8 March 2014, with quote from Krupskaya, "That which unites the working woman with the working man is much stronger than that which divides them. They are united by their common lack of rights, their common need, their common conditions which are the exploitation' of their labour, their common struggle and their common goals." The quote is from the lead article of the first issue of Bolshevik journal *Rabotnitsa* (Woman Worker).**

Thus, for Marxist teachers, defense of public education is inseparable from the struggle for socialism, and this to an even greater degree when it comes to liberating women from their centuries-old oppression. We defend the Cuban Revolution, even against the prohibitions of those rulers who seek to censor the truth, who want to "tapar el sol con el dedo," to block out the sun with a finger, as the Spanish phrase goes. We fervently defend the achievements of education in Cuba, and we will solidarize with every initiative to defend free, high-quality public education and health care for all, and not just for the few who have money, as is the case in Brazil. We fight against plans for phony privatizing "educational reform" pushed by the World Bank, the OECD and other sacred temples of the new Torquemadas, the bonapartist inquisitors and their imperialist masters.

Because we know: without socialist revolution, there can be no socialist education.

With respect to the feminism that teaches that the liberation of women is a battle against men, every March 8, the International Women's Day, we go out with our banner quoting the words of our dear Nadezhda Krupskaya: "What unites the woman worker and the male worker is stronger than what divides them. They are united by their lack of rights, their common needs and their common situation, which is the struggle and its goal."

Long live communism! Long live the Cuban Revolution! Socialism will win. ■

# Class Struggle Education Workers: Who We Are and What We Stand For

As we wrote in the first issue of the CSEW Newsletter: "Class Struggle Education Workers was formed in September 2008 by activists in two New York City education unions: the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), representing public primary and secondary educational personnel, and the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), which represents faculty and staff at the City University of New York. We also seek to involve campus and school administrative staff and maintenance workers who are in the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) as well as other unionized and non-unionized workers. Those initiating the group played leading roles in fights against merit pay and in defense of 'excessed' teachers in the NYC schools, in opposition to the 'two-tier' labor system at CUNY, in defense of immigrant students and in solidarity with striking teachers in Mexico and Puerto Rico." Since that time, we have grown to include members in the health and hospital fields organized in AFSCME District 37 and also from the California Faculty Association (CFA). As we wrote: "The felt need was for a grouping to help provide a clear orientation and leadership in the struggle to defend and transform public education in the interests of working people and the oppressed. This intersects almost every crucial social and political issue of the day and ultimately means bringing down the rule of capital. As this requires a thoroughgoing break from the entire framework of 'business unionism' and the outlook of the union bureaucracy, general calls for more militancy and union democracy alone only lead to a dead end. Instead, the Class Struggle Education Workers is based on a class-struggle program, presented below.

## Class Struggle Education Workers Program

We have formed Class Struggle Education Workers (CSEW) as part of a broader fight for a revitalization and transformation of the labor movement into an instrument for the emancipation of the working class and the oppressed. The CSEW defends unions and unionism against the ongoing attacks of the capitalist class while we wage programmatic struggle against the class-collaborationist labor bureaucracy that seeks to use the unions as an instrument for the disciplining of labor in the interests of capital. The subservience of organized labor goes beyond the PSC, UFT and AFSCME, and we look forward to a class-struggle tendency encompassing militants in a number of unions. We support the basic positions expressed in the Internationalist pamphlets *Stop CUNY's Anti-Immigrant War Purge* and *Marxism and the Battle over Education*. We stand for:

1) Free public education from kindergarten through graduate school. Abolish corporate-dominated Boards of Trustees and mayoral control of the schools: students, teachers and workers

(together with parents at primary and secondary schools) should democratically control schools and universities.

2) Stop education privatization and making the City University of New York into "Walmart U"! For militant action against deepening inequality at CUNY and throughout the school system. Abolish the two-tier academic labor system that pays adjunct and other contingent education workers poverty wages. Job security, parity and full health coverage for adjuncts and all "part-timers," including graduate students: equal pay for equal work. Unite against the drive to gut public higher education and turn it into a "platform" for making profits.

3) Defend and transform public education in the interests of working people and the oppressed. Oppose capitalist corporatization. Cancel all student debt. Living stipend and free housing for students. No to "charter schools" as an opening wedge to privatization. Down with "merit pay" in any form. In the UFT: Full-time positions for all teachers "excessed" or "reorganized" out of their jobs (ATRs). Defend tenure, restore seniority, abolish "rubber rooms" that penalize teachers subject to unjust accusations.

4) Oppose resegregation of schools: separate is not equal. Stop discrimination and racist attacks against black, Latino, Asian and immigrant students. Fight budget cuts, tuition hikes, exclusionary tests and all anti-working-class, anti-minority measures. Restore open admissions, no tuition. Down with the anti-education "No Child Left Behind" act. Stop anti-immigrant "war purges" (like the one CUNY launched in 2001) against undocumented students and workers. Full citizenship rights for all immigrants.

5) Mobilize the power of labor together with minorities, immigrants and students in an all-out fight to smash the Taylor Law. Keep bosses' courts out of the unions. Police and military recruiters out of the schools. No cops, prison or security guards in the unions. For a single union of all university workers. Oust the sellout bureaucrats, for a class-struggle leadership.

6) Parental leave for all. Free childcare on campus, available around the clock for students and employees. Full reproductive rights, including free abortion on demand and full availability of contraceptives; no to reactionary campaigns against sex education.

7) Defend the rights of labor, minorities, immigrants, women, gays and lesbians. Make PSC defense of Mumia real – mobilize workers' power for his freedom. Solidarity with teachers and all workers in Mexico, Puerto Rico and elsewhere.

8) End union support to capitalist politicians (Democrats, Republicans, Greens, et al.). For workers' strikes against the war – Defeat U.S. imperialism. Oppose U.S. war threats against Iran, Cuba, China, North Korea. For a class-struggle workers party to fight for a workers government. ■



# Why Cops and Their ‘Unions’ Have No Place in the Labor Movement

*This article, by a member of the stage hands union LATSE Local 28 and activist in Class Struggle Workers – Portland, first appeared on the website Talking Points Memo, on 24 June 2020. The CSWP has long been active in mobilizing workers action against racist terror, including initiating a “Labor Against Racist Police Murder” contingent in the 2015 May Day march, with participation by Painters Local 10, four other area unions and scores of labor activists.*

**By Becca Lewis**

## **Class Struggle Workers – Portland**

Amidst nationwide protests ignited by the racist police murder of George Floyd, union members everywhere are asking: how can labor throw its weight into the fight to uproot racist repression?

Using our collective power as workers is key. The multiracial working class makes the country’s wheels turn, and can bring them to a halt just as quickly. We have the power to shut down factories and docks, farms and urban transport, food plants and phone service. And now is the time to use it.

But it’s also high time the labor movement cleans its own house. In fact it’s long overdue. As mass anger at police killings shines the spotlight on police forces’ role as enforcers of racist repression, the time is now to carry through the demand long raised by class-struggle unionists, summed up in the slogan: “Cops out of the unions.”

In the weeks since Minneapolis police murdered George Floyd, cops have responded to mass protests by unleashing more violence on protesters. Yet brutal attacks by police across the country have not stifled the voices of millions. As we march, we chant to remember and honor those, like George Floyd, whose lives were cut short by endless racist terror.

Breonna Taylor, shot dead as she slept in her bed in Louisville.

Jamel Floyd died in New York after guards pepper-sprayed him in his prison cell.

Derrick Scott in Oklahoma City, who – like Eric Garner and George Floyd – died saying, “I can’t breathe.” One of the cops holding him down responded: “I don’t care.”

Here in Portland, Oregon, we remember Jason Washington, a member of the National Association of Letter Carriers, shot dead by university police.

Sean Reed, Ahmaud Arbery, Philando Castile, Sandra Bland...

And in recent days, we learned Atlanta police shot and killed a 27-year-old black man named Rayshard Brooks.

As the list keeps growing, we in labor’s ranks join millions searching for an answer to how and when police killings and brutality will end. Workers like me want police “unions” ousted from the labor movement and want cops of all kinds removed from unions and union bodies now: this will be a crucial part of unchaining labor’s power in the fight against racial oppression.

The fact is, we face a glaring contradiction with the inclusion of police in the labor movement. The struggle against racist oppression is crucial to labor’s cause, but the professionals of repression are included in one labor body after another. Freeing labor from any and all affiliation with the cops is crucial to the revitalization of unions, which is a matter of life or death for the labor movement. Yet despite recent efforts by the Writers Guild of America, East and others to rightly call for the expulsion of the International Union of Police Associations from the AFL-CIO, the push has been met with resistance – the AFL-CIO rejected WGAE’s call earlier this month. When members of the labor officialdom try to stop or divert this vital fight, they are wielding the very outlook and policies that have



**CSWP, Internationalist Group and Portland-area unionists protest against Minneapolis police murder of George Floyd, 31 March 2020.**

drastically undercut and weakened our movement for years.

We must resolve this contradiction now if labor is genuinely going to unite with the aspirations of a new generation of workers who want to uproot racism – and if the labor movement is going to transform itself into an instrument for the emancipation of the working class and the oppressed.

As a longtime union activist here in the Pacific Northwest – a region plagued by far-right and white-supremacist forces, as well as attempts to impose union-busting “right-to-work” laws – the fight to oust cops from the unions is linked to all of our efforts to put workers’ solidarity into practice. When trade unionists here mobilize against racist attacks and provocations by far-right and fascist groups, police use the tools of their trade – batons, teargas, flash-bang grenades and pepper balls – to repress the anti-racist protesters.

A vivid example occurred in 2017 after a local fascist stabbed to death two people who opposed his racist rampage against teenage African American women on the MAX light rail train. Days after the attack, far-right groups staged a dangerous provocation in our city. Portland Labor Against the Fascists brought out members of 14 unions to stop it. As has repeatedly occurred, a year after the incident, Portland police were caught coordinating with the far-right groups holding a similar rally. The police encouraged the far-right provocations and provided some of those carrying them out with escorts and transport.

Today in Portland, as elsewhere, many of our fellow unionists who work in media have taken to removing logos from their clothing and cameras while covering protests because – like legal observers dragged off to jail when cops yell “round up the green hats” – journalists have been targeted by the police.

Labor playing the role it must in the fight against racist repression is flatly counterposed to harboring organizations whose purpose is to push the claims, and shield the crimes, of the police. And that is precisely what cops’ so-called “unions” are all about. When Minneapolis banned “warrior training” for cops last year, the police “union” even announced that it would provide such training for free.

While labor bodies like WGAE push for disaffiliation with the International Union of Police Associations, the effort is just one drop in one very large bucket. IUPA is just one of the entities representing the demands and interests of the repressors in blue. “We have a dozen affiliate unions that represent law enforcement in some form,” the AFL-CIO Executive Council noted in its June 10 statement opposing WGAE’s demand. Instead, it’s calling for police groups to adopt a “code of excellence.” This would be the equivalent of cops taking a knee before they go out yet again to bust heads and round up anti-racist protesters.

While police associations are not workers unions, many actual unions (AFSCME, the CWA, SEIU, Teamsters and others) have brought “law enforcement” and repression-industry sectors into their ranks. Having professional strikebreakers in the unions — when unionists face repression from cops and guards in every strike — is a recipe for defeat.

The AFL-CIO leadership’s position would only discredit



CSWP

**Portland protesters denounce campus police murder of Jason Washington, George Floyd and so many others, 18 June 2020. CSWP calls for cops out of our schools and our unions.**

unions in the eyes of a new generation that must be won over to the cause and struggle of labor. And it delivers a slap in the face to countless unionists subjected to police violence, teargas and sonic weapons for protesting racism or standing on a picket line. The officialdom claims that maintaining the affiliation of police is a question of – wait for it – “unity.” Cops’ billy clubs may “unite” with our heads, but real unity of workers, against racist repression, means uncuffing labor from “unity” with those swinging the batons.

The shopworn claim that it’s just a “few bad apples” involved in police brutality across the U.S. is starkly exposed by current events. When police terrorize black communities, target protesters and break up union pickets, they are literally doing their job — a role integral to the profit system, in which racial oppression has always been key to capitalists’ wealth and power. There is no reform or code, no set of rules or oversight that can change the basic role of the police, and they don’t belong in our unions in any form.

Just digging into the history of the police in America, which began as slave patrols, reveals how central it has always been to racial oppression.

After the Civil War, the promise of black freedom through Reconstruction was betrayed. As industry grew, labor — both black and white — faced bloody police intervention. As black workers took the lead in bringing the 1877 labor upheaval into the South, the cops were there to bloodily break up interracial workers’ struggles. When Democratic Party “Redeemers” imposed Jim Crow, the cops were there to enforce “law and order.” Up North, police joined post-WWI pogroms against black communities, while police frame-ups and vigilante lynchings took the lives of immigrant workers like Sacco and Vanzetti, IWW bard Joe Hill, his Native American comrade Frank Little and innumerable other heroes of labor.

*continued on page 82*



# Minneapolis Public Schools Give Cops the Boot

*After the termination of the contract with the Minneapolis Police Department of 14 “school resource officers,” Minneapolis Public Schools hired 13 “school security specialists,” who, however, are not armed and do not have arrest powers. Police were also removed from schools in St. Paul and the Minneapolis suburb of Hopkins, MN.*

MINNEAPOLIS, 3 June 2020 – In an historic move, Minneapolis Public Schools voted unanimously yesterday to cut ties with the Minneapolis Police Department. Horrified by the cold-blooded killing of George Floyd by an MPD cop, educators here and throughout the country denounced this racist murder. The next day, the president elect of the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, Local 59 (MFT59), issued a statement saying, “whatever the courts decide, our students were just given another terrifying lesson on what it means to be black in Minnesota.”

Students at local high schools and community have been organizing for years to get the misnamed “school resource officers” (SROs) out of the schools. The MPS contract with the police goes back to 1967, at the height the white backlash against ghetto explosions over police violence. In the 1990s, the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton launched a “COPS in Schools” program which doled out millions to local school districts to bring in police. This was further ramped up in the wake of the 1999 Columbine, Colorado, school shooting.

Today, according to National Center for Education Statistics, more than 70% of U.S. high schools have police, many of them armed (London *Guardian*, 3 June). In New York City,



Ben Hovland

## Demonstration outside Minneapolis school board meeting, 2 June 2020, demanding no cops in schools.

there is a veritable army of some 5,000 uniformed NYPD officers (called “school safety agents,” although they can make warrantless arrests and use deadly force) plus another 200 regular police stationed in schools. Studies have shown that in schools with a police presence, more students are arrested, fueling the racist “school-to-prison pipeline.” Class Struggle Education Workers has long called for police and security guards out of the schools, and out of the unions.

In 2015-16 there were big mobilizations in the Twin Cities over the police killing of Jamar Clark, near the 4th Precinct in North Minneapolis. A few years later, a scandal erupted over a racist Christmas tree display in the same cop precinct decorated with Popeye’s fried chicken buckets and crime-scene tape. In

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**At 2 June 2020 demo for police out of the schools.**

July 2016, Philando Castile, a cafeteria worker in the St. Paul public schools, was shot to death in his car. And now George Floyd, lynched by a cop smugly putting his knee and the full force of his body weight on George's neck for almost nine minutes while he gasped "I can't breathe."

On June 2, MFT59 held a rally outside Minneapolis Public Schools Davis Center in North Minneapolis demanding "No More Police in Our Schools!" SEIU Local 284, representing food service and custodial workers, also called for cops out. Inside, the school board was scheduled to vote on severing ties with the MPD. Supporters of the Internationalist Group (IG) attended the demonstration, with signs commemorating victims of police lynching in the U.S. and calling for "All Cops Out of the Schools and Unions."

At the demo, teachers and parents shared stories about how their African American and Latino kids do not feel safe with MPD officers roaming their hallways. One mother recounted how her daughter, who was also present at the protest, was tackled to the ground by cops, who cut the straps off her backpack and put her in cuffs. A teacher emphasized that George Floyd's murder at the hands of an MPD officer was a stark reminder that police have no place in public schools. One teacher and a group of high school students did argue for keeping "SROs," yet of 1,600 students who responded to a survey, 90% wanted the school cops removed completely.

Democratic representative Ilhan Omar, who has been the object of vituperative racist attacks, spoke at the rally for no more police in the schools. But the fact is, as we have pointed out, in almost every big city in the country, including the Twin Cities, Democratic mayors are the bosses of the police, and therefore responsible for the systematic racist repression. And the city councils here that vote for school and police budgets are entirely Democratic Farmer-Labor, except for a lone Green

in Minneapolis. They have also presided over the increasing segregation of the schools. In Minneapolis, the number of schools where white students are less than 10% of the total increased sevenfold since 2000 (*The Atlantic*, 12 July 2016).

While the number of police in Minneapolis schools is small, the unanimous vote of the school board to remove them has national importance. St. Paul schools are considering a similar motion next week. "Hey New York, hey Colorado, hey Nevada, look at us — we're making a change with our voices, just like our parents and neighbors are, and you can do it too," said a student activist. But it remains to be seen whether the school district will sign a contract with some other "school safety" outfit, as the *Star Tribune* reports (2 June): "the district must come up with new safety plan by mid-August." Replacing the MPD with private security guards or a simply another police department will mean back to business as usual.

What is vitally necessary is to take control of the public schools out of the hands of the capitalist state, and to turn private and charter schools into public schools. Class Struggle Education Workers calls for the schools to be governed by councils of teachers, students, parents and workers. Cops have now been ordered out of Minneapolis public schools — and they'd better stay out! ■

## Cops Out of Labor...

*continued from page 80*

Down the decades, from police massacres of striking dock workers in San Francisco and "Little Steel" strikers in Chicago, to the police murder of black teenager Larry Payne in the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike to today, strike-breaking and racist repression are central to the history of labor struggle, and of the police.

When police aren't enough, companies rely on assistance from security guards like the Pinkertons (currently known as Securitas Security Services), infamous for strike-breaking as "just part of the job" of protecting capitalist property and making sure that bosses can keep unions in check.

On June 2, Minneapolis Public Schools voted to cut ties with the police department. This important step should spread to other cities. And it means opposing any attempts to replace them with private security guards or some other police department, which would mean more of the same.

Today, all labor faces the old question: Which side are you on?

When painters, construction workers, stage hands and others formed Class Struggle Workers — Portland six years ago, we saw the need to end labor's subjugation to the bosses' institutions, politicians and parties, and for building a workers' party. One of our key inspirations was black and white unionists' struggle to oust police from the municipal workers union in Brazil's "Steel City." Our founding program states: "Police, prison guards and security guards are the armed fist of capital, part of the apparatus of anti-labor, racist repression: they must be removed from the unions."

To unchain the power of labor in the fight against racism and repression, this contradiction must be resolved.

If not now, when? ■



## Columbia...

*continued from page 88*

tor under the bus. The result was a union contract, approved by the membership on January 28, with across-the-board raises (including for minimum hourly pay, which rises from \$15 to \$21 in January and eventually \$22.50), 75% dental coverage, gains on health and child-care coverage, changes on discrimination and harassment policy, and other demands. “Full unit recognition” was achieved. There was discussion of the absence of an “agency shop,” but rather than such measures that institutionalize union/management collaboration, what’s needed is class-struggle unionism.<sup>1</sup>

“Struggle Educates”: this slogan (*La lucha educa*) from striking teachers in Mexico and Puerto Rico is one of our favorites in Class Struggle Education Workers. As detailed in the following article (and the March 2021 leaflet from the previous strike, see page 86), that is very much the case with current struggles by higher-ed educators. This strike followed the ones at New York University and Harvard. While these are high-end private universities, the implications and repercussions of what happened at Columbia are being discussed from the City University of New York to the University of Illinois to the University of California, where grad student workers carried out the “COLA strike” for a cost-of-living pay escalator in March 2020.<sup>2</sup>

It was on the picket line that the gains won in the Columbia student workers strike were made, not through photo ops and speeches by Democratic “electeds,” including those from the Democratic (Party) Socialists of America. The fight to put “Picket Lines Mean Don’t Cross” into practice played a key role, as will continue to be the case in “educating the educators” in struggles around the country. It is a basic union principle – one regularly violated by labor officialdom in their class collaboration with the bosses – but one that’s just a first step toward class-struggle unionism. That focuses on a programmatic struggle for a leadership prepared to take on the capitalist system down the line.

The win at Columbia signals more battles in higher ed between hardline administrations and low-paid teachers. Despite lofty pretensions, in the groves of academe cash is king and poverty wages are the reality for most educators. This is the business model for both public and private U’s. To demolish the two-tier academic labor system and win free higher education for all will take an all-out revolt in which students, teachers and workers break out of the confines of the ivory tower, unite their struggles and forge real links with key sectors of the workers and oppressed.

<sup>1</sup> See “Life After Janus: Bust the Union-Busters with Hard Class Struggle,” *The Internationalist* No. 53, September-October 2018.

<sup>2</sup> See “A Militant Program to Win UC Grad Student Workers Strike,” on [www.internationalist.org](http://www.internationalist.org), March 2020.



**Class Struggle Education Workers, CUNY Internationalists participated actively in Columbia strikes launched in spring and fall 2021 (above).**

Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Class Struggle Education Workers calls for the *expropriation of private universities* and for *student-teacher-worker control of both these and the public ones*. As we have stressed, this is a political fight, requiring a break with the Democrats and all capitalist parties, to build a class-struggle workers party fighting for a workers government.

*The following article is reprinted from The Internationalist No. 65, October-December 2021.*

### Against Bosses’ Threats and Maneuvers – Solidarity from CUNY

## Victory to the Columbia Student Workers Strike!

28 DECEMBER 2021 – As we go to press, the strike of Student Workers of Columbia (part of United Auto Workers Local 2110), now in its ninth week, is at a critical juncture. It is the fourth strike in five years, as the union is still fighting to win a first-ever contract. Representing more than 3,000 Columbia University graduate and undergraduate academic employees (including instructors, teaching assistants, graders, researchers and others), the SWC’s demands include a *living wage* (many student workers who are paid hourly earn as little as \$16 an hour, while those on an annual appointment currently make as little as \$26,000 a year), *better health care* and *measures against discrimination and harassment*.

On December 23, the university presented its “best and final” contract proposal. The SWC noted that Columbia gave some ground on pay, healthcare and other issues. (Certainly, the university can’t plead poverty – its endowment grew more than 32% in fiscal 2021, to \$14.35 billion.) Yet a central sticking point remains: the bosses’ insistence on excluding from the bargaining unit those who have less than 15 hours’ work per week or haven’t yet racked up 250 hours. The purpose is to further divide the workforce and incentivize reliance on grossly underpaid “casual” labor. Calling an online “Rally for

Recognition” on December 30, an SWC spokesperson stated, “By creating a category of ‘casual’ workers who are excluded from the union, the administration will be able, over time, to replace union jobs with ‘casual,’ non-union jobs.”

Union activists rightly emphasize the need to oppose this union-busting scheme. The issue of full union recognition has been a central reason for the current strike from the beginning. Last May, in the previous strike, union members rejected, by a vote of 1,093 to 970, a deal with the university negotiated by the bargaining committee then in office. This was in large part because the proposed settlement would have “excluded hundreds of workers who have gone on strike and organized for this union,” as Joanna Lee, one of the three committee members who opposed it, tweeted at the time. (The *Columbia Spectator* [2 May 2021] reported that “a graduate student union has never before rejected a tentative agreement.”)

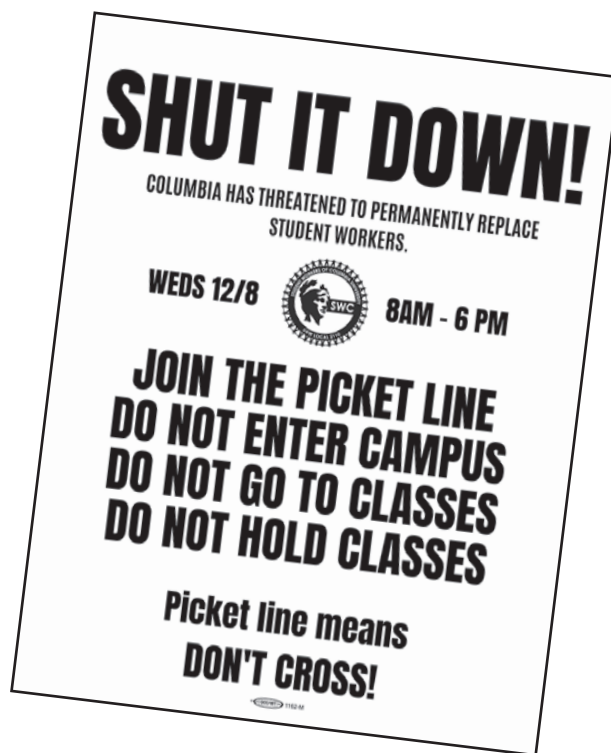
To explicitly reflect its inclusion of undergraduate employees, the union changed its name from Graduate Workers of Columbia to Student Workers of Columbia. A new bargaining committee was elected in July, and in September the membership voted to authorize a new strike, which began on November 3. In this strike, as in the spring and in earlier strikes, activists from the CUNY Internationalist Clubs and Class Struggle Education Workers have participated intensively on the picket lines and in helping build support. In an important step, SWC members began seeking to stop deliveries to the struck campus, starting in the predawn hours, and our comrades have participated in these efforts, which have sometimes met with success.

Throughout, we have emphasized that it’s essential to put into practice the principle that “Picket lines mean don’t cross.” To win a solid victory at Columbia, a pillar of New York’s capitalist elite, it’s key that all classes be cancelled and all sectors of the campus workforce brought out. (See the leaflet of the CUNY Internationalist Clubs and Revolutionary Internationalist Youth, “Solidarity from CUNY – All Out to Win: Victory to the Columbia Grad Workers Strike!” March 2021.) This means “One out, all out,” instead of the labor tops’ policy of keeping the rest of the workforce (including other units of UAW Local 2110) on the job.

As higher-education labor struggles continue to break out across the country, whatever happens at Columbia will be cited as a precedent. A solid victory here won’t be won with business-as-usual unionism. It would need to go well beyond Columbia’s academic “ivory tower” to bring in the power of NYC labor together with oppressed communities. In particular, black Harlem, just below Morningside Heights, has been forever lorded over by Columbia, whose flagrant racism sparked the historic strike of 1968.

### The Struggle Escalates

On December 2, Columbia threatened to fire strikers (which would mean opening the way to their replacement by scabs) if they did not return to work by the 10th, a couple of days before final exams were due to begin. For the strikers, weeks of “one day longer” on the picket lines were stretching toward the end of the semester, bills were piling up, could they hold out? Columbia’s arrogant bosses thought they could finally break them.



SWC leaflet for day of action to shut down Columbia.

Instead, strikers redoubled their determination, upping the ante. The elements of what’s needed to win were coming more sharply into focus for many – in particular, that picket lines really do mean don’t cross. A day of action was called and hundreds of union fliers were posted up calling to “SHUT IT DOWN” on Wednesday, December 8. (See graphic.) The *Columbia Spectator* (9 December 2021) reported:

“On Wednesday, the Student Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers held multiple picket lines blocking all entrances to Columbia’s Morningside campus from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., asking students and faculty not to cross the picket lines in an effort to entirely shut down the campus. The student-workers were joined by faculty members, undergraduates, and members of other unions and labor organizations across New York City.”

Strikers and supporters linked hands, circling both sides of huge campus gates, holding official “On Strike” signs, and often large handmade ones. Early in the day at Columbia’s main entrance on Broadway and 116th Street, a prominent strike organizer, an Asian woman, was viciously shoved by a man who ostentatiously ripped up the large sign she was carrying, which read “ON STRIKE! SHUT IT DOWN! PICKET LINES MEAN DON’T CROSS!” Later at the same gate, an NYPD “Community Affairs” officer lunged suddenly and shoved picketers.

At a different entrance a scab violently barged into a young woman picketer from the CUNY Internationalist Clubs, who was knocked over backwards and would have hit the sidewalk had another picketer not caught her. Anti-strike aggressions multiplied as the day went on – but the Columbia administration, following the union-busters’ playbook, lyingly accused the *strikers* of “violence.”

On December 8, the situation varied from one place and time to another, and so did consciousness. It was notable that,



Internationalist photo



**8 December 2021 Columbia strike day of action drew participation from other NYC unions. Teamsters Local 804 brought its inflatable fat cat.**

repeatedly, where scabs violently busted through the picket lines, determined strike militants doubled down, seeking to uphold and defend the vital labor principle that picket lines mean don't cross. But at some entrances pickets were porous, which undermines strikes. The uneven consciousness reflects decades of union bureaucrats calling "informational" picket lines – a contradiction in terms which teaches people that it's supposedly "OK" to cross picket lines. But as hundreds of Columbia strikers linked hands in large pickets, blocking entrances and chanting "Picket lines mean don't cross," many may have begun to see, for the first time, that once a strike has been collectively decided on, *every-one* must respect the lines. Generalizing and putting this into practice is crucial for the future of this and other struggles.

Outreach to a number of NYC labor sectors brought a lively contingent of Verizon workers from CWA Local 1101; officers and members of the CUNY faculty/staff union (PSC); some activists from DC37, unionized Legal Aid and legal services employees, and others. Most prominent was a truck from Teamsters Local 804, which represents UPS workers, bearing a huge inflatable "fat cat." (This recalls how adjunct faculty at Sussex County Community College in New

Jersey won their contract fight in a day back in 2009, when unionized truck drivers blocked all the entrances.) The Central Labor Council sent out an announcement of the SWC's day of action. This was important, of course – though if the CLC were to actually mobilize to the picket lines even one or two thousand out of the 1.3 million workers it boasts of representing, it would be a whole different ballgame.

As in any strike, it's about power. The strikers' December 8 day of action to "Shut It Down" was a big step up in militancy, and certainly a crucial factor in getting the administration to move on some of the union's key demands. With the new year around the corner, the strikers are sticking to their guns. They deserve and need the massive, militant solidarity that can help push this struggle over the finish line, forcing Columbia's high-handed bosses to give in. A victory for the Columbia strikers would be a boost and an inspira-

tion to workers and students everywhere, as we face the big challenges and opportunities ahead. ■

### *An Internationalist Video*

## **Columbia Student Workers On Strike**



**On the evening of December 8 day of action, hundreds of strikers and supporters gathered outside class being given by Columbia University president Lee Bollinger. Fighting for dental insurance, and to show they meant business, strikers chanted, "We have teeth." See Internationalist video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-DVQ5HISwU>.**

Internationalist photo

# Solidarity from CUNY – All Out to Win Victory to the Columbia Grad Workers Strike!

*The following 16 March 2021 leaflet by the CUNY Internationalist Clubs and Revolutionary Internationalist Youth was distributed at the strike lines at Columbia University.*

Spirits were high on the 200+-strong picket line as Columbia University research and teaching assistants launched their strike on Monday, March 15. Defying the haughty barons lording it over this fiefdom of academic privilege – which has the nerve to claim poverty as it sits on a \$11.26 billion endowment – the strikers chanted “What’s disgusting? Union-busting!”

Organized in the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC), which for two years has been bargaining for its first contract and is part of UAW Local 2110, the strikers denounce “starvation wages,” the university’s resistance to improvements in health coverage as well as its provocative refusal to accept a “union shop” or even measures the union holds essential to protecting its members against discrimination and harassment.

Coming amidst the inspiring organizing drive of largely African American Amazon workers in Alabama, an important nurses’ strike in Massachusetts that began on International Women’s Day, the fight against the Liox/Wash Supply company’s union-busting firing of immigrant women laundry workers here in NYC – and soon after the major Teamsters strike at Hunts Point market in the Bronx – the Columbia strike may be part of the beginnings of a new upsurge of labor struggle.

For us at the City University of New York, solidarity with the GWC strike is connected to our fight against adjunct poverty, the two-tier labor system, course cuts and the conditions that make just getting an education harder than ever for CUNY’s students, whose families are largely workers deemed “essential but disposable” amidst the crises of this decaying capitalist system. We need a CUNY-wide strike. As this would go up against New York State’s vicious Taylor Law – which “prohibits” strikes by public employees and has been administered by Democrats and Republicans alike – solidarity would be crucial to a CUNY strike. The stakes are big, and as clarity is crucial, we will address the issues frankly.

For GWC strikers, uniting with CUNY is also part of breaking free from the confines of Columbia’s overwhelmingly white ivory tower, smack in the middle of Harlem. This is essential for uniting with the workers and oppressed who have the power to bring to their knees the racist plutocrats who are trying to break your union. Recall that Columbia’s flagrant racism towards the Harlem community, and its links to U.S. imperialism’s genocidal war against Vietnam, touched off the huge student strike of 1968.

The same NYPD that carried out a bloody police riot



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

**At Columbia University grad workers strike, 24 April 2021.**

against the 1968 strike is notorious for cop terror against black people today. Meanwhile the Columbia administration’s arrogance is unabated, as it tells GWC strikers they don’t “deserve” protection against discrimination and preaches “mutual realism” (sic!) to student workers struggling to pay their rent in the midst of a pandemic.

To defeat the anti-union administration and its ruling-class godfathers, however, it is not enough to be right and have justice on your side – it’s a question of power. On strike means shut it down. All classes should be stopped, now, and students brought out *en masse* to the pickets and rallies. Moreover, as shown in one strike after another by grad students, TAs, adjuncts and others across the country and here in New York, including by UAW 2110 (see box, reprinted below): for university strikes to win, all sectors of the campus workforce need to unite in genuine solidarity – *one out, all out. Picket lines mean don’t cross!*

At the March 15 rally marking the first day of the GWC strike, the president of the NYC Central Labor Council gave a speech vowing that the city’s labor movement is behind the strikers 100%. But words are not enough – if the city’s major unions built mass pickets to shut Columbia down, the strike could be won in a day. We need to fight for this to happen. But why *doesn’t* the labor leadership put real muscle behind the words of solidarity, even in struggles much bigger than this? First and foremost because it subordinates the unions to the Democratic Party of U.S. imperialism, which together with the Republicans has administered the capitalist system for more than a century and a half.



This too was on display at the strike launch rally. It's not unusual for labor leaders to put a couple of "friend-of-labor" Democratic pols up on the platform – but the March 15 rally may have set a new record, as a seemingly endless assemblage of candidates for mayor and city council used it as a photo op and to test out their stump speeches on a captive audience. Reliance on capitalist politicians – instead of the militant mass mobilization of *workers power* – has brought defeat to all too many strikes and labor struggles.

Of course, capitalist politicians don't like it when workers go against the bosses' rules – even less so when their own party is in the White House, as is the case with Joe "Mass Incarceration" Biden today. That's why they have their Taylor and Taft-Hartley laws, their NLRB regulations, their racist cops, courts, prisons and all the rest of it. As revolutionary Marxists, we call to break from the Democrats and all capitalist parties and politicians, and to build a class-struggle workers party to fight for a workers government. Then, like the rest of the wealth coined from the labor of the workers and oppressed, Columbia U. will be expropriated and put at the service of the needs of all, as part of a socialist revolution here and around the world.

***Solidarity from CUNY to the GWC – All out to win – Victory to the strike!***

### **On Strike Means Shut It Down: Some Lessons of UAW Local 2110's 2005-06 Strike at NYU**

Today [March 2021], as the Columbia graduate workers union (GWC) is carrying out its strike, the New York University graduate employees union (GSOC) says it too may go on strike soon, if the NYU bosses – whose arrogance rivals that of Columbia's – keep stonewalling. Like the GWC at Columbia, GSOC at NYU is part of United Auto Workers Local 2110.

Since our inception in the campaign to stop the City University of New York's "anti-immigrant war purge" in 2001, the CUNY Internationalist Clubs have helped bring out solidarity from students and adjuncts with struggles by sectors of city labor, notably immigrant restaurant, warehouse and laundry workers such as those the Liox/Wash Supply company fired this February for organizing a union. This has also included supporting organizing drives and strikes at a range of different universities. We believe some of these struggles have important lessons for today. Among them is the important grad student strike that UAW 2110/GSOC led at NYU from November 2005 through May 2006. Today at Columbia, strikers chant, "What do we want? A contract! When do we want it? Now! If we don't get it, **SHUT IT DOWN!**" Key, then and now, is to put that into practice.

The 2005-06 NYU grad students' strike was launched with enthusiasm and determination. Yet, backed by the National Labor Relations Board's viciously anti-labor Brown ruling, the hardline NYU administration let GSOC's contract expire, refused to negotiate a new one – and wound up dealing the strikers a bitter defeat. Nine years went by before GSOC-UAW finally succeeded in negotiating a new contract. In 2016, the Brown decision was reversed; while this can lessen some legal

obstacles to organizing, it remains crucial for labor to rely on its own power. Since the ruling class can go quite a while without college papers being graded (whereas a transport strike, for example, can shut things down tight in a day), bringing in active support from other sectors – and large numbers of students – is doubly important.

Key issues in the November 2005 UAW 2110 strike at NYU were addressed by the CUNY Internationalist Clubs in a leaflet issued at that time, advocating that CUNY join NYU on strike. Many of the issues posed then have continued to come up, again and again, in struggles by grad students, adjuncts and others across the country – and are posed today in the fight to *win* the current GWC-UAW strike at Columbia. Below is an excerpt from our November 2005 leaflet "NYU & CUNY: Strike to Win."

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"The potential to win is shown by the willingness of many unionized truck drivers to stop deliveries rather than cross the picket lines. New York is a union town, and labor could mobilize thousands to shut the campus down in an instant. Yet the labor tops have limited themselves to the ritual [speechifying and grandstanding].

"[The university's] employees are divided into various separate unions whose leaders negotiate separate expiration dates and have kept operations going during this strike. Maintenance, supply, elevator repair, garbage disposal and all the other plant work goes on. AFT Local 3882, representing clerical workers, just signed a contract, with a clause against sympathy strikes. Most absurd and self-defeating is the existence of a *separate* union for NYU adjuncts, UAW Local 7902, which operates out of the same office as striking UAW 2110 – but continues to work during the strike!

"During the 2003 Yale University strike, clerical and other workers mobilized *en masse*, shut down streets, paralyzed crucial work, and beat back a haughty, aggressive administration. Members of the Yale workers' union have repeatedly come to the NYU picket lines to show their support. In contrast, the recent (2004 and 2005) Columbia University graduate assistant strikes were lost: UAW 2110 struck but the union tops had clerical and other workers, often members of the same union, continue to work. [*This is the case in today's strike as well.*]

"The concept of dividing the workforce into separate unions (craft unionism) was overcome in auto, steel, transport and other strategic industries in the 1930s' battles to build 'industrial unions.' On college campuses seven decades later, splitting workers up this way just plays into the administration's divide-and-conquer strategy.

"Fighting to win the current NYU strike would help open the way to unite everyone into a single union of all university employees. This should include the professors, who don't have their own NYU union and in most cases continue to teach; it clearly must not include administrators, campus cops and other enforcers for the employer."

*The whole leaflet is available online at [internationalist.org/nyucunystriketowin0511.html](http://internationalist.org/nyucunystriketowin0511.html).*

## Fourth Strike In Five Years

# Columbia Strike Wins, More Struggles Ahead



Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

On the first day of the Columbia University student workers strike, 3 November 2021.

It was the longest higher education strike in more than a decade, and one of the largest recent strikes in the United States, carried out by a union representing 3,000 graduate and undergraduate student employees. After union members voted down a tentative agreement that sold short their demands in the spring, the November 2021-January 2022 strike by the Student Workers of Columbia won a contract that was the first ever for the union, and the first anywhere in the U.S. to win recognition of union representation for all undergrad teaching and course assistants, together with grad student workers.

On January 7, after almost ten weeks on strike – their fourth in five years – Columbia University’s student employees scored this important step forward against one of the most notorious employers in the “academic labor industry.” The Student Workers of Columbia (SWC) held out on the picket lines and escalated the struggle at a decisive moment in the fight for a contract, full recognition of their union, significant

improvements in pay, health and child care, measures against discrimination and harassment, and other demands.

This meant defying high-and-mighty Columbia U.’s drive to grind them down and mete out a new defeat that would teach defiant employees a lesson. Rather than cave to the bosses’ threats, the strikers collectively decided each week to continue the struggle. Against the threat to replace strikers, their 8 December 2021 “Shut It Down” action was a turning point. After an earlier “last, final offer,” on Christmas Eve Columbia said it would give further ground on key demands, *if* the union agreed to accept the exclusion from the bargaining unit of hourly employees with less than 15 hours/week of work, a relatively small part of the workforce.

Instead, strikers decided to stand fast, voting to “go all in on recognition” of all the union’s members, indignantly refusing Columbia’s demand that they throw their most vulnerable sec-

*continued on page 83*

***La lucha educa: Picket Lines Mean Don’t Cross***