

Privatization in the Name of the Ruling Elites. The Assault on Public Education

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Among the many facets of classical European fascism (many of which are becoming increasingly true in the “Friendly American Fascist” version that is cunningly [and rapidly] being instituted by ruling elites here in the good old USA) are these twenty or so traits, gleaned from “End of America”, by author Naomi Wolfe and “The 14 Characteristics of Fascism”, by author Lawrence Britt, PhD. Here is the list that I compiled from those two sources, in no particular order of importance:

- 1) the suppression of workers’ rights and trade unions,
- 2) the suppression of socialism and democracy,
- 3) the support of corporatism and corrupt crony capitalism,
- 4) the normalization of human and civil rights violations,
- 5) the normalization of fraudulent elections,
- 6) the merger of church and state,
- 7) an obsession with law and order,
- 8) press censorship,
- 9) control of the media by ruling elites,
- 10) uber-patriotism (the promotion of powerful nationalist feelings),
- 11) attempts to unify majority factions of the nation by the scapegoating of minorities,
- 12) powerful militarism,
- 13) sexism,
- 14) xenophobia (fear of foreigners),
- 15) a strong national security/surveillance state, the suppression of dissent,
- 16) the targeting of whistleblowers and truth-tellers,
- 17) anti-intellectualism/anti-science,
- 18) the development of a “thug class”,
- 19) the harassment of citizen’s groups by “law enforcement”,
- 20) the development of a gulag of prisons and 21) the arbitrary detention and release of citizens to instill fear.

My purchasing decisions, my eating decisions, my politics and what candidates or political party I support or vote for are shaped by how many fascist traits I find in the particular industry with which I do business or what candidate or party is running for office. Just looking at that list and you will know that I (and a lot of other peace and justice folks that I know) am a member of the most anti-fascist party that I know of: the Green Party. (Candidates embracing the increasingly irrelevant democratic wing of the Democratic Party [the Wellstone-wing] occasionally also get my support.)

The destruction of labor unions, workers’ rights and the “privatization of practically

everything” (including public education and teachers’ rights) seems to be one of the agenda items around which both major political parties are uniting. So when I ran across the powerful article below (from the Labor Fightback Network at www.laborfightback.org), I knew it deserved a wider audience. Therefore I include it below in its entirety.

DEFEND PUBLIC EDUCATION!

Public education, one of the storied pillars of our society, is under attack by people and institutions who like to think of themselves as “reformers.” What is the message of these self-styled reformers? They contend that the public schools have “failed.” They want to close “underachieving” public schools. They want to fire teachers and kick out teachers’ unions. They want to privatize public schools. Finally, they want to embrace high-stakes testing.

Who are these “reformers?” They include politicians from both political parties such as George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Jeb Bush, Rahm Emanuel and Corey Booker. They include foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Foundation (Walmart), and billionaires like former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg. They also include market-based education ideologues such as Michelle Rhee of the misnamed foundation, Students First; as well as Wendy Kopp of Teach for America. Here are a few of the issues.

1. **POVERTY.** Most of these ideologues, foundations, and politicians dismiss poverty, dysfunctional families, and deteriorating neighborhoods as “excuses.” All students should be able to excel in school, and if they don’t the fault lies with the teacher and their unions.
2. **TESTING.** Both “No child Left Behind” under George W. Bush and “Race to the Top” under Barack Obama feature a reliance on high-stakes testing. Standardized tests in reading and mathematics will determine whether or not a school or teachers within a school are doing their jobs properly.
3. **PRIVATIZATION.** Most of the “reformers” listed above embrace some form of privatization of part or all of public education. Some embrace charter schools, which exist alongside the public schools and draw students, and others champion vouchers, which are payments directly to the student or the student’s family so that the parents can use the money to choose a school for their son or daughter. In many cases, this means non-union, private, for-profit schools or private for-profit on-line delivery systems run by corporate education companies.
4. **PRIVATE INVESTMENT.** One of the major players in the school “reform” movement are Wall Street investment firms and hedge fund managers whose goal is to supplant the current geographically based public school system that we have known and replace it with a competitive, market-based system of school choice. Many Wall Street investors see public education as the next great frontier for private investment.
5. **SEGREGATION.** Now, almost 60 years after *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, segregation is alive and well in what passes for public education. In urban centers, financially strapped public schools are almost all African-American or Latino. In corporate-run charter schools, the pitch is often to particular target audience . . . often white students from affluent families. Charter schools can select their student body and

they often “counsel out” students with disabilities or students who have low achievement records. The result is that privatization helps re-segregate American schools.

The Vilification of Teachers and Their Unions

If there is one target in the sights of these advocates of the corporatization of public schools, it would be American teachers and their unions. Almost all reformers vilify teachers and their unions. Such apostles of destruction as Wendy Kopp (Teach for America) and Michelle Rhee (Students First and former school chief in Washington, DC) have denounced unions and called for the repeal of teacher tenure laws. Their utopia would be a world in which every teacher worked in a privatized, non-union system of schools with no job security and no due process rights. If a teacher’s students do well on a battery of standardized tests, then the teacher has employment for another year. If the teacher’s students do not do well (often for a variety of reasons beyond the teacher’s control) the teacher is fired. Often whole schools would be closed if they were judged to be “under-performing.”

In large cities such as Chicago and Cleveland, the public schools are no longer run by elected boards. Instead, they are run out of the mayor’s office by unelected bureaucrats. In most cases, these mayors are Democrats. They often have unfettered power to close schools and impose testing. In Chicago, Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel, an ally of President Obama, has promised the closing of more and more neighborhood schools. He also provoked a long and bitter strike with the Chicago Teachers Union. School closings were one of the key issues in that strike.

The assault on public education is a bi-partisan effort

The assault on public education is a bi-partisan effort with both Democratic and Republican politicians and education “experts” from both parties taking aim at teachers and especially at teacher unions and collective bargaining for teachers and other school workers. From Republican administrations to Democratic administrations, federal policy, through the Department of Education, to the states has been one of market-driven continuity. President George W. Bush gave us “No Child Left Behind.” Then, President Barack Obama initiated “The Race to the Top.” Both Federal programs contain an emphasis on high-stakes testing in reading and mathematics, as well as closing schools and firing teachers. What effect do these programs have on schools? Let’s take a look:

1. *CURRICULUM*. Faced with federal mandates to use testing, public schools often short-change other subject areas (literature, history, music, and art) in order to concentrate on the subject areas for which there are standardized tests. Administrators often tell teachers to “teach to the test” in order to help the school get high scores on the standardized tests.

2. *CHARTER SCHOOLS*. Most charter schools are private schools that have been started in order to compete with public schools. Many charter schools are like chain stores with a number of them being owned by the same newly formed education company. Governors like those in Ohio (Republican) and Illinois (Democratic) have cut the budget for public education and instead have funneled money to charter schools. For their part, many charter schools exhibit a Jekyll and Hyde demeanor. In order to position themselves to get taxpayer money, these private, corporate schools claim that they are public schools. However, once the funds have been delivered and outside citizens begin

to inquire about just how these “new” public schools operate, charter school officials frequently announce that they are private entities and thus are not required to be transparent with parents or the public in general.

3. *FREE MARKET IDEOLOGY*. Liberalism since its inception in 19th Century Britain has always held “free markets” as a core belief as the best way to achieve a just society. Today, this continuing faith in unfettered markets is called “neo-liberalism” and is embraced in varying degrees by both Democrats and Republicans in the United States. One of the pillars of this emerging neo-liberal consensus (among power brokers, that is) is the idea of “school choice.” These proponents seek to privatize prisons, schools, public services, the management of roads and highways, just to name a few. It is an article of faith with them (unsupported by any studies) that privately run schools are by definition better than public schools. In addition, this programmatic push seeks to open up public education as a new frontier for corporate investment. Public schools are derided as “cost centers,” while privately run charter schools and online “schools” are lauded as “opportunity centers.” One might ask: opportunity for whom? Investors for sure. Kids? Not likely.

What can those of us who believe in public education do?

First, we must recognize that attacks on the public schools and on teachers and their unions are part of a broader neo-liberal attack (supported by both political parties) on the following: the labor movement, public services like schools, and the safety net (features of the welfare state that benefit workers such as Social Security, Medicare, Food Stamps and other programs). The goal is either to eliminate these services, institutions, and programs; or, if doing so would provoke too much of an outcry, then privatize them, thereby opening them up to private investment and control by the same forces that provide most of the funding to the major political parties.

Second, we must recognize that resistance to this assault must begin at the local grassroots level in cities and towns across the country. What does this mean?

1. Local teachers unions and other unions must reach out to neighborhood organizations, faith groups, and parent groups to build local coalitions with a common program that opposes cuts and privatization. Surveys have found that parents are often very positive about their local neighborhood schools and would resist efforts to close or privatize them.

2. These same coalitions must put pressure on school boards (where they exist) and on members of the local city or town council. Eventually the coalitions should sponsor independent candidates for city or town council and for local school boards. Even when unsuccessful, these campaigns can help provide to local voters an alternative message to the message of the mayor and local Chamber of Commerce and local foundations, which emphasize blaming teachers, closing schools, and privatizing education.

3. The coalitions should spend time becoming better informed on the issues presented here. This is hard to do because many will be working parents with many other responsibilities.

However, we should not allow the duly appointed “experts” who favor privatization to define the issues. Coalition members should attend school board meetings and city council meetings (even en masse when necessary). Reading is critical and here are three of the many books that touch upon the issues described above:

- (1) Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools, by Diane Ravitch,
- (2) Class Warfare: Inside the Fight to Fix America's Schools, by Steven Brill, and
- (3) Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life, by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis.

The forces arrayed against us are well-funded and aggressive. They have support from the highest citadels of political and economic power in America. However, this is a struggle for the soul of what remains of democratic life in the United States. We must work at the local level to build not just grassroots resistance to these "reform" efforts, but we must also fashion alternatives to preserve public institutions and to save local democracy. If we fail, then, in the future, we will have the rhetoric of democracy . . . but gone will be its substance.

For more information on the Labor Fightback Network, please call 973-944-8975, email conference@laborfightback.org, write Labor Fightback Network, P.O. Box 187, Flanders, NJ 07836 or visit our website at laborfightback.org.

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