

The Atlanta “Cheating” Case and the Crisis of Public Education in the US

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Global Research, April 03, 2015

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

On Wednesday, four former elementary school teachers, two principals and five administrators in Atlanta, Georgia were convicted on state racketeering charges for inflating the results on standardized tests taken by public school students. The brutal and vindictive treatment meted out to the educators is a watershed in the campaign to vilify teachers and further dismantle the public education system in the United States.

The Fulton County prosecutor argued that charging educators under the state’s Racketeering Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act, which is ordinarily reserved for organized crime cases, was warranted because the educators personally benefited from changing the answers on the tests through bonuses and promotions. They face 20 years or more in prison.

In fact, an investigation by the Georgia governor’s office in 2009 found that a “culture of fear, intimidation and retaliation infested the district,” led by then-Superintendent Beverly Hall, with teachers facing humiliation, demotion and firing if they did not meet student achievement targets.

The convictions followed an unprecedented seven-year probe by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation that was characterized by a “Salem witchcraft mentality,” according to the defense attorney for elementary school teacher Dessa Curb, the educator acquitted of all charges.

The seven-month court case had the air of a show trial, with police mug shots of the defendants plastered across the web site and pages of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, which launched the initial investigation into rising test scores and demanded that an example be made of the educators who did not make plea bargains.

With a certain glee, the newspaper reported the chilling scene after the jury rendered its decision, when the middle-aged educators handed their jewelry and personal belongings to attorneys and loved ones before they were handcuffed by deputies and hauled off to jail to await sentencing.

Scandals involving doctoring test scores are the inevitable outcome of the punitive “teacher accountability” schemes that have been promoted by both big business parties to scapegoat teachers for the consequences of decades of budget-cutting, teacher layoffs and the growth of poverty, which the best teachers in the world cannot possibly overcome.

The obsessive promotion of standardized testing began with former President George W.

Bush's 2001 "No Child Left Behind Act," which was co-authored by Democrat Edward Kennedy. It has been accelerated under Obama's Race to the Top program, which rewards school districts that tie teachers' pay and jobs to "performance" and "valued added" targets, while accelerating the closing of "failing schools" and their replacement with for-profit charter operations.

It has long been the reactionary argument of these so-called school "reformers" that the needs of children are being sacrificed to the supposed selfishness of teachers, by which they mean demands for decent pay, smaller classroom sizes, more supplies and a measure of job security.

The campaign against teachers is above all aimed at destroying what remains of the egalitarian and democratic character of public education and intensifying the drive toward a class-based school system, where the children of the wealthy enjoy the best that money can buy, while the sons and daughters of the working class are relegated to 19th century-style "poor schools."

If anyone should be held accountable for conspiring to undermine and destroy education, it is those who have systematically starved the public schools of resources in order to provide more tax breaks and business opportunities to the super-rich. These include the billionaire oligarchs Eli Broad and Bill Gates, the Pearson textbook and testing empire, and other corporations seeking to cash in on the \$1.3 trillion "education market."

Along with them should be President Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, who have overseen the wiping out of hundreds of thousands of teachers' jobs and the closing of more than 4,000 schools. Not to be left out are the leaders of the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association, who have not only sided with the Atlanta witch-hunt, but facilitated the attack on teachers and promoted the expansion of charter schools.

While workers are persecuted without mercy, the perpetrators of crimes that have destroyed the lives of tens of millions continue to operate with impunity. The entire US economy is based on "racketeering" and conspiracy against the people.

The Wall Street banks, credit rating agencies, federal regulators, news media and politicians from both big business parties conspired to cover up the financial criminality that led to the 2008 economic crash. While millions lost their homes, jobs and savings, the financial aristocracy was not only not held accountable, it was made richer than ever.

The US government launches wars based on lies, invades countries, and organizes "regime change" operations in blatant violation of international law. The highest levels of the state and military-intelligence apparatus are implicated in torture, yet no one is held accountable.

The Obama administration dispatches drones to assassinate anyone it chooses, including American citizens, and deploys the largest domestic spying apparatus in history, and the only ones who are made to pay are those who expose these unconstitutional crimes, such as Edward Snowden, Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning. The police brutalize and murder unarmed citizens with no fear of prosecution, while the full weight of the capitalist state, including militarized police departments, falls upon those who dare to protest.

This is class justice in America.

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