

this substantial loss of revenue clearly would have a chilling effect on public school officials in determining policy or curriculum when faced with such pressures.

Rather than get drawn into this or that movement for educational reform, workers should unite in defense of their class interests based on the under-

standing that education under capitalism exists to create another generation of workers to sell their labor to the capitalist owners of industry—but *only as they are needed*. Only under socialism, where the means of production are owned and operated collectively by workers, will education be free of the fetters of a decaying social order.

A Socialist Labor Party Statement—

What's Behind the Attack On Public Education?

The crisis afflicting America's system of free public education is apparent to all, but particularly to parents whose children must attend the public schools and the teachers who work in them.

This crisis in public education is marked by the spread of crime and violence, drug selling and drug abuse, racism, anarchy and other problems that seem to run rampant in schools and schoolyards across the country.

Cities and Suburbs

Some of these problems are worse in the inner cities, where the poor and most oppressed elements of the working class are herded like so many cattle—worse, that is, than in the suburbs that surround the cities, or in the rural communities located far away from the great metropolitan areas.

Few public school districts anywhere enjoy complete immunity from these conditions, however, and their occurrence almost everywhere is convincing evidence that these problems are linked to a common source.

These afflictions of the public education system are not the only links to the complex variety of social ailments that permeate the country. The quality of education itself is in decline, and that decline has nothing whatever to do with the capacities of teachers to teach or of children to learn.

Teachers today are as skilled and

devoted to their trade as workers are in any other industry, but their skills and motivation are being subverted in much the same way that the skills and motivation of workers in other industries are being undermined. The same is true of the children, who start to school as bright and eager as children ever did. There is something else at work—something that eats at and destroys the natural human spirit of wanting to share and absorb knowledge.

Socialists believe that common link is the capitalist system. Antisocialists trace it to other sources—to bureaucracy, to an erosion of “traditional values” or the breakdown of the traditional family, to “bad elements” or to a decline in religious faith. Some suggest teachers are to blame, or even the children themselves.

Signs of the Times

In truth, however, none of these things can be taken as causes of what ails the public education system. Taken together, they are only signs of the times in which we live—nothing more than so many effects of the same cause that explains them all. They explain the breakdown in public education no more than a cough explains a sneeze, or a stuffy nose explains a raspy throat. And for that same reason, none of the nostrums for “correcting” the problem can succeed. Indeed, most are not meant to succeed as

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methods of improving the system of education, but of enlisting recruits to causes with ulterior motives or of opening new fields for “private enterprisers” to profit from the criminal abuse and waste of our children at the hands of a bankrupt social system.

Cause and Effect

The crisis in America’s public schools reflects the crisis of capitalist society. In fact, “public education” institutions, whether on the local, county, state or federal level, are integral parts of the capitalist state.

Historically, the movement for universal public education was supported by the working class. However, America’s working class should not lose sight of what is happening now. At any given time various bourgeois factions, such as political organizations or even private companies, may sway school-governing bodies in one direction or another. But, the fundamental purpose of education under capitalism is to train the younger generation of workers to take their places on the labor market.

One might think this would provide the capitalist class with a powerful motivation to exert great pressure on the state to preserve and improve on the quality of public education and to keep the meddlers out. Indeed, a great racket has been raised about how new technology is revolutionizing industry at all levels, and of the need for a new generation of workers trained and disciplined to operate them. What better motivation do the corporate owners of the country’s industries need to exert that pressure than their demand for workers capa-

ble of being employed and exploited?

Actions speak louder than words, however, and despite the talk it is obvious that the school system is falling apart. Instead of a new generation of highly skilled working men and women, we hear of students graduating from high schools and colleges who are “functionally illiterate” and incapable of solving the simplest of mathematical problems.

To understand the apparent contradiction it is only necessary to remember that “new technology” and “labor-displacing technology” are two names for the same thing. Capitalists need a new generation of workers to exploit, but not necessarily an entire generation. Automation means that fewer workers will be needed to operate the new industries. As for the rest of the new generation, capitalism will have no use for them.

‘National Standards’

This is the real issue in the debates over “national standards” and related federal legislation. The Clinton administration has pushed through Congress education bills that have attempted to address issues such as violent crime in the schools, but basically have aimed for “bringing more technology into the classrooms” and “an overhaul of the student loan program” with a “school-to-work transition.” For the last 10 years, prominent politicians and spokespersons for private corporations have urged reforms for the avowed purpose of producing graduates who will improve America’s position in more intense competition for world markets. The intracapitalist-class conflicts are over tactics, or the feasibility

of this or that program to serve the capitalist interests that support them. With remarkable candor, many community colleges have actually issued “warranties,” meaning that if their graduates are incapable of doing the jobs they were trained to do their employers can “send them back to be fixed” like any other commodity.

The physical and social disintegration of public schools is often chalked up to “school bureaucracy.” Indeed, many capitalists have lost so much faith in their own system that they have taken matters into their own hands. Often under the banner of “choice” or “alternatives” in education, private corporations have given large subsidies to schools. According to one report, for instance, a school in Cabot, Vt., received over \$125,000 in “private and government grants...for staff and curriculum development, computer technology and new performance measures.” To increase efficiency and “accountability” some schools, such as those in Baltimore, Md., and Hartford, Conn., have hired a “for-profit company to run their schools.”

In higher education, outright “gifts” from wealthy capitalists have generally been more common. Even so, the donation of \$77.4 million by William Hewlett and David Packard to rejuvenate the science and engineering departments of Stanford University was not an act of altruism. Altogether, Hewlett and Packard bestowed \$300 million on Stanford over the years. To say that they expected a return on their investment is a gross understatement.

Another important trend in elementary schools is pressure from right-

wing political organizations, often under “religious” auspices. In some cases, such as in Tavarest, Fla., school boards proclaim their refusal to be intimidated by demands to indoctrinate their students with national chauvinism. In this particular case, a 1991 Florida law forbids teaching “ethnocentrism,” a fancy word for racism.

In general, school-governing bodies attempt to balance competing interests and to promote the welfare of the capitalist system as a whole, as opposed to capitulation to “fringe” or “extremist” demands. However, America’s working class should have no illusions about the state’s willingness or ability to protect them from these reactionaries. Obviously, in the history of capitalist rule, the forces of reaction sometimes have gotten the upper hand.

‘Home School’ and ‘Vouchers’

Many American working-class parents have grown disgusted and disillusioned with the condition of the public schools. The response is understandable and fully justified, but it is also exploited by reactionary politicians and self-interested promoters who urge people to shun the public schools and opt for “home schooling,” or more often their own “private schools,” not infrequently “religious” schools. “Vouchers” supplied by the state to parents would give them the “freedom of choice” to select either a “private” or “public” school. The conventional system of government funding of public education would be supplemented or replaced by subsidies to both private and public institutions, thereby introducing the “competition of the marketplace.” The threat of