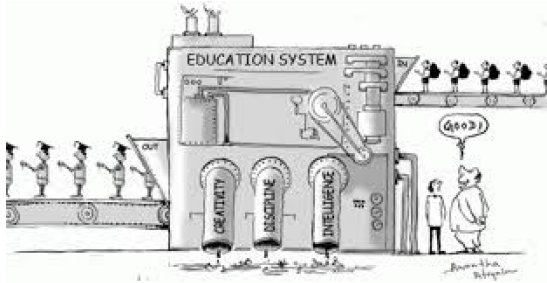


Clever Corporate Criticism of U.S. Schools - by Gerald Coles

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Note: In this guest blog, Gerald Coles, known for his work in literacy education and disabilities, describes capitalism's love/hate relationship with public education.

U.S. capitalism has a hate-love relationship with the nation's schools. On the "hate" side is a stream of complaints from business leaders and organizations about the many students, particularly in city schools, who fail grade-level achievement tests, are high school dropouts or, if they complete high school, do not have the academic qualifications for college and advanced-skills education. Given these educational failings, how will the nation's economic system obtain the workforce needed for the 21st century economy?

On the surface, this corporate complaining seems to have merit, however, if we pose the question of "how well are the nation's schools serving U.S. capitalism?," there is every reason to conclude that business leaders and organizations, despite their complaints, actually very much love the schools because, overall, the nation's schools do a first-rate job educating and providing the array of workers capitalism needs. As importantly, the varied academic achievement outcomes provide capitalism's leaders a major explanation of why vast numbers of Americans either work for wages insufficient to meet individual and family basic needs, have job insecurity, cannot obtain secure work, can only patch together several part-time jobs, have jobs for which they are educationally overqualified, and why so many workers lead financially precarious lives. Who's to blame? Why, the schools, of course!

Fundamental to the corporate criticism of the schools for failing businesses and vast numbers of Americans is the view that in the 21st century high-skilled global economy, the nature of work is dramatically changing. That is, an increasingly greater number of high-skilled jobs now demand more workers with the education to do these jobs and schools have the task of providing the educated workers for them. An example of corporate blaming-casting is a report, sponsored by the National Association of Manufacturers, the National Defense Industry Association, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, expressing worry that the U.S. would not "sustain [its] economic leadership of the world because the nation's schools were not providing the highly skilled workers" businesses need to win in the global economic combat.

For businesses' political surrogates, this perspective has been bi-partisan. President Barack Obama maintained: "The source of America's prosperity has never been merely how ably we accumulate wealth, but how well we educate our people. This has never been more true than it is today . . . education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity and success, it's a prerequisite for success." This prerequisite was the aim of his Common Core State Standards, legislation devised "to ensure that students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to be globally competitive."

Despite Donald Trump's antipathy for all-things-Obama, he echoed his predecessor by expressing support for an educational "agenda . . . that better prepares students to compete in a global

economy." Equipping "America's young people with the relevant knowledge and skills that will enable them . . . to compete and excel in lucrative and important [high tech] fields." Echoing her father's vision, Ivanka Trump, "senior advisor" to the President, proposed closing the "growing gap between workforce and business needs and workers' skills" by beginning to teach tech in Kindergarten, thereby putting "our citizens on a pathway to a job."

Strong support for this vision of "education for the 21st century economy" has come from national teacher organizations. For example, arguing that new business imperatives underscore the need to fully-fund schools, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, asserted that "today's public school teachers are on the front lines of our collective efforts to compete in the global economy." Providing scholarly evidence for this view has been the work of many leading educational scholars, such as Linda Darling-Hammond, who advocated for schools in which all students, especially those living in poverty, have "access to an equitable, empowering education" that will enable them to "thrive in a technological, knowledge-based economy."

High-Tech Jobs and the U.S. Economy Past and Present

To appraise these purported "21st Century" business and employment imperatives, let's look first at the current proportion of high-tech jobs (commonly called STEM—science, technology, engineering, mathematics—jobs) in the U.S. economy. Calculating the proportion of these jobs, the Bureau of Labor Statistics determined that "depending on the definition, the size of the STEM workforce can range from 5 percent to 20 percent of all U.S. workers." Looking at the issue historically, we find that in 1850, around the start of the Industrial Revolution, top-skilled jobs made up about 10 percent of all work. Consequently, using the Bureau of Labor Statistics' generous calculation, we can conclude that the proportion of STEM jobs has doubled, but it has taken over 160 years to do so, and these jobs still represent only a significant minority of overall jobs—particularly if the 20 percent estimate is high.

With respect to the workforce the schools educate for these high-level jobs, a study by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), concluded that the "United States has more than a sufficient supply of workers available to work in STEM occupations," thanks to increased student enrollment following forecasts of employment opportunities in these jobs: "For every two students that U.S. colleges graduate with STEM degrees, only one is hired into a STEM job." In computer and information science and in engineering, "U.S. colleges graduate 50 percent more students than are hired into those fields each year." Reviewing the "skills gap crisis," the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), a "global management consulting firm and the world's leading advisor on business strategy," with clients in the world's 500 largest companies, concluded it was "overblown. Putting the "crisis" in broad employment terms, BCG added, "Trying to hire high-skilled workers at rock-bottom rates is not a skills gap."

Looking at the array of current and future work, according to job projections of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately two-thirds of today's occupations do not require post-secondary education. Although jobs not requiring post-secondary education will decline in the years ahead, by 2022 they will still comprise more than half of all new jobs that are expected to be created. Furthermore, of the thirty occupations with the largest projected employment increase by 2022, *two-thirds*—such as jobs in personal health care aides, home health care aides, retail salespersons, food preparation and service workers (which includes fast-food workers), janitors and cleaners, medical secretaries, insulation workers, and construction assistants—will typically not require post-secondary education.

Another illuminating perspective is to compare STEM jobs in the 1950s with the present. In the

1950s, STEM jobs were about 15 percent of all jobs, a proportion that continued into the 1960s. Yet despite this relatively modest percentage, those years were a time when good-paying jobs expanded across the economy and the long-hailed U.S. "middle class"—defined as having a good wage, a house, vacation time, some savings, a retirement pension—was built. And profits accumulated as well. When Trump demands we “make America great again,” that is the time to which he looks back.

However, given these relatively modest percentages of STEM jobs that persisted over decades and up to the present, why is it that now there is the corporate insistence that if American workers are to survive in the new economy, they must acquire advanced skills (STEM) education. In other words, between the height of the American Dream years—the 1950s and 1960s—and now, the percentage difference in STEM jobs has been about 5 percent, and perhaps less. Is it really possible that with just 5 percent fewer STEM jobs, the age of the American Dream was built? Or, looking at the other side of the equation, how can we explain that the middle class was built with 85 percent non-STEM jobs, yet presently the middle-class is collapsing with about 80 percent non-STEM jobs?

One major answer lies in the difference in organized labor then and now, and in the forbidden phrase: labor’s “class struggle.” Consider manufacturing jobs. Although there are not as many manufacturing jobs now as then—currently, there are slightly more than 12 million such jobs in the United States, compared with about 15–16 million in the 1950s—today’s 12 million or so manufacturing workers should, by themselves, demonstrate an area of employment through which, as before, the American Dream could be reached. In other words, shouldn’t the mantra be, “If you get a STEM education or a manufacturing job, life can be good (or, at least somewhat economically secure)?” The answer, unfortunately, is no, because, as a study by the National Employment Law Project illustrates, today’s manufacturers can pay workers deficient wages, so why should they pay them more? In the 1950s, economist Robert Reich calculates, manufacturing job wages were significantly higher than the average wage: “Fifty years ago, when General Motors was the largest employer in America, the typical GM worker got paid \$35 an hour in today’s dollars.” Wages for manufacturing jobs have continued to drop over the decades, however, with many manufacturing jobs now paying less than a living wage. Currently, the median wage in manufacturing is \$15.66 an hour, with approximately one-quarter of manufacturing workers earning less than \$12/hour., and many earning just \$10–\$11/hour. For example, General Electric workers in Louisville, Kentucky, earn \$13/hour making electric water heaters. Remington, the gun company, pays workers \$11/hour in its Alabama manufacturing facilities.

Serving Capitalism Well

Why does corporate America actually love the nation’s schools? Given U.S. capitalism’s control of the American economy, the economic system’s educational needs are best served by ensuring that the nation’s school achievement does not get out of hand; that is, schools cannot become too successful in producing well-educated graduates for purported but nonexistent vast number of STEM jobs. To accomplish this, the corporate successful answer is a simple one: Just provide enough funds to maintain the educational system that overall currently serves the economy well; ensure that taxpayers fund most of the schooling serving businesses; do not fully fund schooling for those poor or marginally poor American youth whose futures will fit well with the present and future jobs that will be predominant in the economy, namely, fast food, simple service, basic health care, low-skilled factory work; maximize profit by not contributing more to the public good than is absolutely necessary for business needs; and pay workers as little as possible, maintaining that the work and wages are commensurate with their educational levels and skills.

Were the schools as a whole not serving the economy well, we can be certain that the nation’s major

corporations, such as Walmart, Dow Chemical, Goldman Sachs, Chevron, Microsoft, IBM, and Apple would be focused on duplicating the best educational outcomes in STEM education by providing schools with additional tax funds from the more than a trillion dollars these corporations have stashed in offshore tax havens. Similarly, were these corporations concerned that not enough poor children were being properly educated to meet employment needs, we should not doubt that some of these unpaid taxes would have made their way into these children's lives.

What To Do?

Blaming schooling, teachers and students turns the nation's focus away from the reality of the array of jobs available and from U.S. capitalism's numerous ways for extracting ever-greater profits, such as paying the lowest wages here and abroad, reducing or eliminating an array of job benefits, outsourcing work, and creating an ever-growing temporary workforce. While all the blame is foisted on teachers, students, and Americans generally, the "failure of education" ideology is meant to keep the eyes of Americans on one message: YOU are responsible for yourself; getting a decent job and having a decent income depends solely on YOU; and if YOU don't have a good job and income it's because YOU haven't had the right kind of education, for which educators are to blame. Your problem is not a consequence of corporate policy, corporate greed, and corporate attacks on the public good, not a problem of how wealth is acquired and used. YOU and your teachers are the problem, and most of all, you are a problem for American business and America because YOU have failed to become part of the skilled workforce these businesses and the nation need.

Teacher organizations, parents and older students must face the reality of never obtaining the reforms demanded because the schools are serving the capitalism well although capitalism is not serving vast numbers of people well. Consequently, it is imperative for teacher organizations and other social justice groups concerned with education to begin creating an opposition that explains how educational achievement is primarily contingent on what the economic system needs, which is far different from what American workers and families need. That is, schools serving capitalism well is not fully the same as serving all children and young people well. With respect to the curriculum, these organizations need to take up the very difficult but necessary task—surely a task that will meet strong corporate resistance—of insisting that "education" for the "21st century economy" is a legitimate goal, but that "education" must include comprehensive study of the actual working of that economy.

At the present time there has been an increased, critical spotlight on capitalism. "Capitalism" is no longer the word that cannot be uttered. For example, inquiring about American views on capitalism and socialism, Gallup Poll found that a substantial percentage of Democrats/Leaners (57%) had a more positive view of socialism than of capitalism, with the most positive view expressed among Americans 18 to 29. While Americans overall have a positive view of capitalism, the rating has declined over the last eight years, positive rating the lowest since 2010. Again, most significantly, public conversations about "capitalism's" benefits and harms are increasingly in public and political discourse. Recently, for example, Senator Elizabeth Warren introduced of the "Accountable Capitalism Act," which raises questions about the interests corporations serve. Education activist organizations might do well working to create similar legislation.

The time is overripe for teacher organizations to frame schooling and school reforms within the context of that-which-must-be-named. Only by doing beginning to explain within this context how schools as a whole serve capitalism and why capitalism resists reforms and funds for reforms that would better educate more students, will teachers' organizations begin to acquire a more successful leadership role in improving young people's education, lives and futures.

*This article is drawn from Gerald Coles' Miseducating for the Global Economy: How Corporate Power Damages Education and Subverts Students' Futures (Monthly Review Press, 2018).
References for this article can be found in the book. He can be contacted at gcwriting@fastmail.com*

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