Fighting the Right-Wing Attacks on Education

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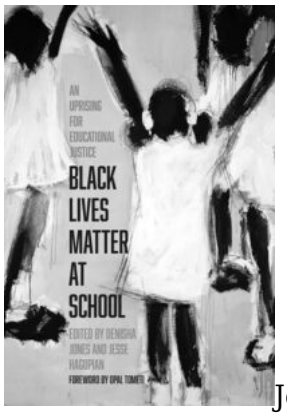

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PG: Hi Jesse, it's great to talk with you. You've been a radical educator for many years and have experienced some of the highs of organizing and some of the attacks on public education and educating around the history of racism and the history of other forms of oppression and inequality in the United States, which seem to be ever present. But it seems like over the past few years, there's been an intensified attack on public education, particularly by Republican governors and legislatures in states like Florida and Texas and others, and an intensification of attempts to restrict what students have access to, banning books, banning curriculum, etc. So, can you talk a little bit about that—maybe put it in some historical context? What's been happening over the past few years and your longer experience with this in the U.S.?

JH: There absolutely has been an intensification of the attack on anti-racist pedagogy, on black history, on truthful accounts of how structural racism functions in the United States. And this attack on what the Republicans have labeled Critical Race Theory (CRT) is ironic because Critical Race Theory argues that structural racism can be embedded in the law, even when the law doesn't specifically mention race. So, we know that black people were prohibited from voting across the South under Jim Crow segregation and yet there wasn't a law that said black people can't vote in the South. But there was a whole web of policies and practices that nonetheless functioned to prohibit African Americans from voting.

The attack on Critical Race Theory is also ironic because one of its central tenets is that any advancements towards racial justice will be met with a white supremacist backlash. And you can clearly see that this attack on Critical Race Theory is a response to the 2020 uprising for black lives. You have to remember that that was the largest protest in U.S. history. *The New York Times* cited

studies showing somewhere around 20 million people participating in these protests, in every state of the country.[4] Anti-racist books were at the top of the bestseller lists. In fact, the definition of racism was changed by the protests when Merriam-Webster actually added a passage to their definition of the term that included structural racism, to move beyond understanding racism only as interpersonal.[5] And all of these things terrified the right who were very scared of the change in consciousness in the United States. And you can tell a scared racist because they don't want to engage you in a debate, they just want to legislate away your right to speak or teach the truth. And that's what we're seeing. Christopher Rufo packaged everything that scares the right in this country with the term Critical Race Theory. He went on Fox News and challenged President Trump to take on Critical Race Theory. And when Trump saw that segment, he suddenly turned his focus to using that phrase, Critical Race Theory, as the new strategy for the Republican Party.

So, I think that there are several things that are really undergirding this, this attack on anti-racist education right now. I mean, most obviously, it's being used by the Republican Party to motivate their base to go to the polls, as an election strategy. We're seeing the ways that the right is claiming that white students are being shamed in their history classes and that white parents need to protect their kids from learning about black history. And this is their strategy for mobilizing voters for the upcoming presidential election. But I think it's a lot deeper than that. I don't think it's only about mobilizing voters for the election. I think another primary reason for the attack on anti-racist education has to do with the drive for neoliberal privatization of our schools. You can clearly see from comments from Christopher Rufo, the Manhattan Institute, and so many other of the right-wing, billionaire-funded think tanks that are encouraging parents to withdraw their kids from the public schools because they're being shamed by Critical Race Theory, and to instead enroll in charter schools and private schools, or advocating for voucher programs that will siphon money out of the public schools and allow parents to send their kids to private schools—a scheme that was originally born in resistance to the Brown versus Board of Education Supreme Court decision to desegregate the schools.

But I also think that the drive to eliminate Critical Race Theory, black studies and ethnic studies, and any other form of educational resistance to white supremacy, is motivated by a drive for epistemicide—the idea of annihilating whole systems of knowledge.[6] And I think that the process of colonization in this country has always required the colonizers to attempt to eradicate systems of knowledge that allow people to understand ways to resist their oppression. When the conquistadors came over and attacked the Mayans, one of the main things they did to attempt to erase Mayan culture was they collected every text they could find produced by the Mayans and lit a match and burned all the books. I think there are there are four Mayan books that survived that bonfire.[7] That was an act of epistemicide to destroy whole systems of knowledge. But there have been many instances throughout U.S. history as well. I think you have to understand that when the first laws were passed in South Carolina in 1740 to make it illegal for black people to be literate, one of the goals was to erase the knowledge that black people had about their homeland and how to resist oppression. And during Reconstruction, when the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacists burned down 600 black schools, they were attempting epistemicide to erase systems of knowledge that can empower the oppressed. And during the McCarthy era, when they fired thousands of teachers who were discussing ideas about our economic system, about racism. They were attempting to eliminate systems of knowledge that could help students resist. And it's happening again today.

PG: That's an amazing history and some of that is new to me. Now, you said that the recent phase of attacks is clearly a response to the 2020 protests that began with Trump, although not very successfully to begin with. Trump tried to launch the 1776 Commission in the fall of 2020, which was an attempt to rebut the 1619 Project in the New York Times, which traces the significance of slavery and racism in U.S. history from the date when the first enslaved people were brought to North

America. But the 1776 Commission flopped. Professional historians laughed at it because it was obviously so full of holes.[8] But pretty quickly the right regrouped and now the onslaught is in full fury, as it were. So, what did they do and why have they been successful, to the extent that they've been successful?

JH: I think the history in 2020 of how this crusade against CRT started is really important to detail because when Christopher Rufo first introduced this attack on Critical Race Theory, there was a flurry for a couple of months of the president and Fox News and the broader right attacking Critical Race Theory, and then it went dormant for a little while. And then Trump was voted out of office and Biden was elected. And many liberals at the time believed that this was the end of the attack on Critical Race Theory. They assumed that we would go back to the consensus that existed around education reform for a long time. There has been a bipartisan consensus that we should privatize education and defund the schools and give that money to private charter operators and vouchers. There has been a bipartisan consensus that we should reduce the intellectual and emotional process of teaching and learning to a single test score and then use that score to punish schools and teachers and children. There's been broad bipartisan support for some of the worst corporate reform. I think many Democratic Party establishment figures believed they could just return to that era. And it was a gross miscalculation, because they didn't oppose very rigorously any of the attacks on anti-racist education. So, you have some of the most shocking bills being passed in state after state that are literally requiring teachers to lie to students about American history, to lie to students about slavery and the impact of structural racism on this country.

PG: They say that structural racism doesn't exist, right?

JH: It doesn't exist and if you get caught teaching it, there are consequences. And despite these dystopian laws being passed, you saw hardly a peep from Democratic Party establishment figures. It allowed this movement of the right to grow, and it created space and legitimacy for some very harmful ideas to flourish. And that's really because I think that many of the extremely wealthy Democratic Party politicians whose campaigns are funded by billionaires don't have much of an interest in educating America's youth to understand the way that capitalism was born out of the transatlantic slave trade and the way that the transatlantic slave trade created systemic racism. And then the way that systemic racism persists through today through many policies that are enacted by both parties that maintain mass incarceration in our country, inequitable school funding, and so many other manifestations. And so, because establishment figures in both parties really don't have an interest in educating youth about how to undo structural racism, there was a lot of space open to the right to advance these anti-truth laws, and they took advantage of it. I mean, they have billionaires like Charles Koch, who was helping to fund this movement. And they bought Astroturf organizations like Moms for Liberty and tried to sell this as a spontaneous uprising of parents, when it was clearly funded by Republican Party operatives and extremely wealthy right wingers.[9] And, you know, Moms for Liberty's definition of liberty is really astounding. They see no irony in the name of their organization when they put a $500 bounty—what they called a bounty—on the heads of teachers in New Hampshire for the first person who caught a teacher teaching about racism in the classroom.[10] And they've been documented leading just vile harassment campaigns against educators and school board members in Florida and elsewhere. So, I think that's a lot of why there was space for this to grow. The wealthy funded this and their strategy for growing it across the country.

PG: And it's also given space for the far right to grow. They've often spearheaded these attacks on school boards. Under the cover of fighting for liberty they're pushing a far-right agenda. It includes not just attacks on teaching about racism, but also this huge onslaught on trans kids and on the trans community.

JH: That's absolutely right. I mean, the Proud Boys were showing up to school board school board meetings and intimidating and threatening educators to such a degree that the Attorney General even had to issue a statement declaring an emergency for the safety of educators.[11] And they have, as you said, expanded their attack from targeting black students and black education to also attacks on LGBTQ+ students and education. And they are using the playbook of the McCarthy era right now, pretty precisely. Just as in the McCarthy era they combined the Red Scare with the Lavender Scare, today they're combining the attack on Critical Race Theory with the attack on what they call gender ideology. During the McCarthy era, thousands of teachers across the country were fired under suspicion of being communists, but many educators were also fired under suspicion that they were queer. And there was a specific, nasty campaign that occurred in Florida against LGBTQ+ teachers, led by a committee known as the Johns Committee that was originally established to attack the NAACP and civil rights organizing.[12]

PG: This was in the 1950s?

JH: Yeah, in the '50s. And then the Johns Committee expanded its mission to harassing LGBTQ+ teachers as well. This is a history that everyone needs to know to understand what's happening today. These Florida officials led this homophobic crusade against queer school teachers that resulted in their interrogation, firing, and the revocation of their teaching certificates. These educators were forced to appear before committees, usually composed only of men, from the office of the superintendent to law enforcement and members of the Johns committee that was established in 1956. I'm trying to remember exactly how many teachers, but a lot of teachers came under suspicion, especially women who were unmarried, who came under suspicion of being lesbians and were fired. And this is exactly the kind of divide-and-conquer witch hunt that they want to bring back today to stifle our social movements. Because people need to remember that the biggest strike wave in the U.S. happened after World War II. And there were also incredible movements for racial justice that were taking off in this post-war era. And the Red Scare and the Lavender Scare were about suppressing those social movements, just the way that this attack on CRT and "gender ideology" is about suppressing the Black Lives Matter movement and the growing LGBTQ+ movement today.

PG: So, the attacks are not going to stop anytime soon. And we can't really look to the Democratic Party establishment to organize resistance to this. As you said, the underlying privatization of public education is something which they have gone along with over the past 20 to 25 years. There was very little difference between Obama's education policies and George W. Bush's education policies. And, similarly, Biden has not made this a priority in any way. But there are examples of people resisting and fighting the book bans and these attacks. Can you give some examples of that and talk about what we should do to respond to this right-wing attack.

JH: When the right-wing attack on truthful education about race and gender and sexuality was first launched, while the establishment Democrats were nowhere to be seen, groups like the African American Policy Forum sprang into action with their #TruthBeTold campaign[13] and immediately started tracking where these anti-history laws were being proposed and helping to organize people against them. And then the Zinn Education Project, where I work, launched the first National Day of Action on June 12th of 2021.[14] And it was an incredible outpouring of solidarity. It was co-sponsored by Black Lives Matter at School.[15] And the action drew hundreds of educators and their supporters who gathered at historic sites in more than 20 cities to publicly pledge that they would teach the truth about racism and oppression and highlight the histories of their communities that would be prohibited in the classroom under these new educational gag-order laws.

So, there were incredible events across the country. In Waterloo, Iowa they went to a series of sites that have been impacted by segregation and employment discrimination in the '50s and '60s and taught students and parents and educators about how structural racism functioned in their city. In

Memphis, they did an incredible walking tour to highlight the history of white supremacy that was being whitewashed with these educational gag orders. They went to the site where Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Confederate General and the first Grand Wizard of the Klu Klux Klan, had run a market to sell enslaved people. And the march organizers pointed out that their school, Memphis Grizzlies Prep, was located on that downtown lot that was once operated by Forrest. And this is the history of their own school that is going to be eliminated if educators can't talk about structural racism, structural violence. And then that August, the Zinn Education Project and Black Lives Matter at School and the African American Policy Forum partnered for another weekend of action. Even though the major Democratic Party institutions and liberal organizations were scarcely seen, there were still many hundreds of teachers all over the country, and parents and students, who were rallying. And now every year, on that June anniversary, we've had successive national days of action to #TeachTruth. This will be our third annual coming up this June 10th and its promising to be the biggest ever, because now the national unions are onboard. The National Education Association is playing a larger role this year and helping to support. And there are over 30 endorsing organizations. And that's been an important development to help change the narrative and have people see that the real grassroots effort around education is coming from teachers and parents and students across this country.

There have been some incredible stories of students leading walkouts. There was a student in Florida who wanted to join the Dream Defenders call to oppose these anti-truth laws, and he was threatened with suspension by his principal for helping to organize a walkout of his school. And yet, as he organized and the pressure built, he was able to carve out space and forced the administration to grant him time to lead a walkout. There have been high school and college students across the country who are refusing to submit to these laws. And it's really inspiring to see the potential of this growing national campaign to reclaim our education. I really think we're at a crossroads in this country right now, where we could go back to the era of the Red Scare, when paranoia and fear gripped American society and people were terrified of raising their voices to challenge injustice because of the dire consequences. Or we could emerge into an era like the Civil Rights and Black Power movement that gave birth to the ethnic studies struggle that finally burst through that stultifying conformity that was imposed by McCarthyism, and made space for black students, indigenous students, and students of color to learn their history in schools and campuses across the country. And I think whether we return to an era like the McCarthy era or we defeat this right-wing attack and usher in a new era of social movements depends on the organizing that we do right now.

PG: That example that you mentioned, which starts with grassroots organizing, often by individuals who just take the initiative and local groups and so on—these are the genuine grassroots organizations—hey can then put pressure on the big organizations like the teachers' unions to get involved. And that's very important, because they have the resources, they have the money and the networks and the membership, because the NEA has got about 3 million members, I think, something like that. That makes a real difference. But it's going to take that grassroots initiative, I would say. So that's a fantastic example.

What about more broadly? Can you comment a little bit on the wider fight against racism and various forms of oppression in the U.S. right now? We had that peak in 2020 of the Black Lives Matter movement, but we're obviously not at that point in terms of the struggle today. What I see is an increasing polarization. The far right, which is a very small minority, is financed and well-organized and enabled to have an impact much bigger than its numbers would suggest. But at the same time, there's also been a radicalization on the left, and young people in particular have got quite critical views of the way that U.S society works and what needs to happen. So, given that polarization in these two different directions, where do we stand in terms of taking on some of these broader issues—in education, but more broadly as well?

JH: Well, the right-wing believes that the growing social justice consciousness amongst youth is the product of radical educators. And there are definitely radical educators doing important work to educate youth about structural racism and inequality. But the greatest teacher to young people about inequality in America is American capitalism itself, which has thrown 40 million people into poverty in the world's richest country. You have a situation where a handful of billionaires have as much wealth as the bottom half of humanity. You have a student debt crisis that's causing young people to have to mortgage their futures to get an education. Mass incarceration has resulted in having more black people in prison, on probation or parole than were enslaved in 1850, just ripping black families apart across the country. So, the conditions of young people's lives are teaching them that this system is intolerable and doesn't work and it is pushing many to look for answers for how this society can maintain such intolerable levels of inequality.

One of the answers that young people are discovering is that the police play a major role in maintaining this level of inequality. And they see when they protest against injustice, like the brutal murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tony McDade, and so many others, that the police come and brutalize them. And they learned that the state has a coercive apparatus that's used to maintain this inequality. They're also learning now that the other way that the state tries to maintain this level of inequality is by regulating the education system to stop young people from questioning the inequality in the first place. So, all of these events, I think, are leading many people to draw radical conclusions about the need to transform society. And I think that social justice educators can be there to support youth in helping them to draw those understandings, and also to organize in their unions and in their community organizations to fight for a society where the wealth that we all create is used to build stronger communities, healthy children, rather than used to build prisons and police forces that punish communities of color or bomb people around the world. I think it is polarizing because the right knows that this system is teaching so many people about its limitations.

PG: And even when it's not the police who are the perpetrators, the way that the system operates is just so blatant. I'm thinking of the killing of Jordan Neely recently on the New York subway. A young black man, homeless, who's choked to death by another passenger. And we don't know the full circumstances, but we do know that this young white man who killed him was not detained and as we're speaking right now, hasn't been charged. I don't know if he will be charged with a crime at some point. But you can't even imagine that happening if the colors of the people involved here were reversed. If it had been a black guy who had choked to death a white guy on the New York subway, the response would have been so different.[16]

JH: That's absolutely right. And young people are seeing this on a regular basis. This is a horrific miscarriage of justice. And it isn't just that this racist system trains people to believe that black lives don't matter enough that they can choke them to death on the subway, it's also that the system then protects those who murder black people. And it isn't even just that. Not only does the system encourage white people to kill black people and then shield them from consequences, but then it wants teachers to lie to kids and tell them that that didn't happen and erase that from history. If you think that's hyperbole, you need to check the news story that came out yesterday that showed that Florida banned 35 social studies textbooks, and then pressured a whole host of other publishers to censor content in their textbooks. And one of the passages that was completely removed from a Florida textbook detailed the Black Lives Matter uprising of 2020 and suggested that George Floyd's murder had something to do with the impetus for that uprising. And so now students in Florida will no longer learn that George Floyd existed, that his death helped inspire the largest protests in U.S. history.[17] This is all being thrown down the memory hole, because they're scared of what happens when kids learn the truth about how their racist system functions.

PG: Well in a sense that shows too that, as you say, they're scared of the sense of justice that so many young people come to, pretty much by themselves. You just have to live in this society to start

to see the way that it works. So, I don't think these efforts are going to be successful in stopping that radicalization from continuing. But what's so important is that people find ways to organize and to work together and build solidarity across different struggles as well, because that's how they win—it's divide-and-rule, it's demoralizing people, it's making you think that you can't have any effect on what's going on in society. And if you can do that, then a very small number of people can continue to exploit and steal the wealth of the society and keep the majority subordinated. So, I'm hoping that the radicalization we see is going to move in the direction of better organization as well.

JH: I completely agree. They rule through divide-and-conquer and fear. Florida recently passed a bill that now makes it a felony for a teacher who's caught with a contraband book about race or gender or sexuality in the classroom, that carries up to five years in prison.[18] So, they are calculating that their campaign of terror will lead to the submission of educators and social movements. And I think they are badly miscalculating because there certainly will be another uprising. And when that next uprising occurs, I think that people will not be content with just repealing the educational gag orders prohibiting teachers from teaching about structural racism. I think that they will be demanding ethnic studies programs in every public school across the country, black studies programs, gender studies programs, queer studies programs. I think that they will be demanding the redirecting of funds from police and from tax breaks for the wealthy to educate our youth and provide the wrap-around services that our families need to be whole and healthy. And I think that in this period before that uprising occurs, people would do well to defy the educational censorship laws and learn the history of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and other organizations like it that banded together youth in a movement against the structures of racism in this country. They founded the Freedom Schools and led the Mississippi Freedom Summer campaign of 1964, where the final exams were not some meaningless standardized test, but organizing other people into the struggle or registering people to vote. And education in this context takes on a whole new power and meaning. And I think many young people are ready for that, are beginning to get organized. And my hope is that these kinds of national organizations will emerge in the coming period that can help guide the next uprising to achieve many more of the goals of those in the struggle for social justice.

notes

1. Rethinking Schools.

2. Black Lives Matter at School.

3. Zinn Education Project.

4. Larry Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui and Jugal K. Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," *New York Times*, July 3, 2020.

5. David Williams, "A Missouri woman asked Merriam-Webster to update its definition of racism and now officials will make the change," CNN, June 12, 2020.

6. See Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

7. Georges Fery, "Burning the Maya Books: The 1562 Tragedy at Mani," *Popular Archeology*, October 23, 2020.

8. Kenya Evelyn, "Historians rail against Trump administration's 1776 Commission," *The Guardian*, January 22, 2021.

9. Maurice T. Cunningham, "Just who is behind Moms for Liberty?", *Tampa Bay Times*, July 9, 2022.

10. Peter Greene, “New Hampshire And Moms for Liberty Put Bounty on Teachers’ Heads,” *Forbes*, November 12, 2021.

11. Erica L. Green, “Justice Dept. Will Address ‘Disturbing Spike’ in Threats Against School Personnel,” *New York* Times, October 5, 2021.

12. Kartik Krishnaiyer, “Remembering the shameful Johns Committee: McCarthyism in Florida,” *The Florida Squeeze*, February 20, 2023.

13. The African American Policy Forum, “Welcome to the #TruthBeTold Campaign”.

14. Zinn Education Project, “A Day of Action: Educators Pledge to Teach the Truth”, June 10, 2021.

15. Black Lives Matter at School.

16. More than a week after Jordan Neely’s death, following a public outcry and numerous protests, Daniel Penny, the man who killed him, was finally charged with second-degree manslaughter.

17. Joe Hernandez, “Florida rejects some social studies textbooks and pushes publishers to change others,” NPR, May 10, 2023.

18. Erum Salam, “Florida teachers forced to remove or cover up books to avoid felony charges,” *The Guardian*, January 24, 2023.