Saving Public Education and Democracy

written by Lois Weiner | August 5, 2024

The Left has focused on support for vouchers in Harris' running mate but has missed that in either a Harris or Trump presidency, we'll need to fight powerful elites to save public education

Harris' clinching of the Democratic nomination altered the presidential election in a heartbeat, and in that respect changed everything. But in another way her candidacy illuminates what has not been altered, the need to see who our opponents are and what they have planned and accomplished. Progressive outrage and fear have focused on Trump's platform Agenda47 and the GOP's platform, Project 2025. As Diane Ravitch and others have warned, both threaten not only public education but democracy itself. Unlike the Teamsters, whose president Sean O'Brien has flirted with Trump, both national teachers unions, AFT (American Federation of Teachers) and NEA (the National Education Association), are moored firmly with most of the AFL-CIO, mobilizing members to help Democrats defeat the GOP and Trump in November.

AFT and NEA endorsed Harris immediately, sprinting along with most unions to shore up the Democrats' dismal campaign with Biden as their standard bearer. Labor is understandably concerned about Trump's appeal to workers, even union members, especially, white workers, who don't see through the pro-business, anti-union, policies masked by Trump's bellicose, pseudo-pro working class rhetoric. And like other progressive organizations and politicians that fear a Trump victory, NEA and AFT asked no questions of Biden or Harris nor made demands. So in racing to endorse Harris, AFT and NEA gave Harris carte blanche to establish her own agenda for public education, one we are seeing unfold in her thinking about staff, like Rahm Emanuel, and running mates, like Josh Shapiro, Pennsylvania's governor who advocates vouchers, receives huge contributions from corporations including several key edtech billionaires, and supports Biden's stance towards Israel's policies in Gaza.

In making breathtakingly rapid endorsements of Harris, unions have lost the possibility of educating their members about the possible rewards –- and risks — of a Democratic victory. The endorsements for Harris came from NEA's board of directors and AFT's executive councils, not members, not locals. Yet in the 2016 election, the last time AFT and NEA released statistics about members' votes in national elections, close to one-third of NEA members and one-quarter of AFT members voted for Trump. Staff who worked in two battleground states in 2020 told me (on the pledge of anonymity) that though NEA had poured every available resource into the election, it had been unable to move the needle on members' votes in key districts. Endorsements that don't allow members direct voice is a strategic mistake: It cheats the union of one of its greatest strengths– a membership that trusts

the union speaks for its members.

Failing to make demands on Harris before the endorsement is a terrible mistake for another reason: It ignores the Democratic Party's history on "ed deform," the bipartisan consensus on education, begun with Ted Kennedy and George Bush creating "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB), which made standards and standardized testing the only measure of academic achievement that mattered. Legislation that tied individual student, teacher, school, and district success to tests led to closings of "failing schools," "merit pay" for teachers, and scaling up creation of charter schools and lucrative charter management organizations. Though education is a responsibility and right of the states according to the Constitution, standardized testing, based on Common Core standards, aligned with international comparisons of education to make nations and workers competitive in a new global economy, created a *de facto* national curriculum and a far more lucrative market. The liberal (and union) critique of Project 2025 and Agenda47 identifies its terrible dangers to education -– and ignores what has been lost, or rather, given away by both parties, to corporations.

While some Democrats can be persuaded to oppose charter school expansion and funding formulas that are vouchers in disguise, the party itself welcomes public/private partnerships, the gateway drug of privatization. Harris has signaled her alignment with Obama's embrace of corporate influence of education policy, shown by her flirtation with Rahm Emanuel and the public re-entry of Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), a group of high-profile Democrats. DFER pushes "free market" policies advanced by the American Enterprise Institute, ideas taken and polished from the fusty Hoover Institution. Exploiting educational inequalities as a ruse for its policies, DFER's campaign in Massachusetts to squash any limitations to standardized testing echoes the project to use educational technology to upend society and privatize public education propounded in 2009 by Chubb and Moe, Hoover's two granddaddies of "free market" education policy. DFER's push to protect standardized testing, using money that can't be traced, shows us "Dark money isn't back. It never left."

Wall Street and Silicon Valley have become more open about a reconfiguration of the old plan to harvest profits from education, planning how venture capital will save public education. The most recent twist continues the chilling project, one supported by both parties, begun before Covid to use software and platforms to control learning and teaching. Accelerated during the pandemic, intensified since, the project has already rooted itself deep in the schools. A global market beckons, with the fastest growing and wealthiest companies concentrated in a few countries, primarily China, India, and the US, although European countries are starting to catch up.

This newest iteration of privatization ensnares education at all levels, from pre-K through higher education. While venture capital's interest in the older forms of edtech may be drying up, hopes and money are pinned on AI. Indicative of the threat not even recognized is Microsoft's deal to buy the rights of material in books and journals published by Taylor and Francis, without authors' consent or knowledge, for use by AI. Huw Davies, a researcher at University Edinburgh on edtech and privatization, assessed the challenge: "I think this is the frontier now. If AI companies can capture and monetize all the free academic labor that's gone into writing and reviewing research articles, especially for open access, and they also plagiarize the resources and lesson plans that teachers have shared in good faith, then education is in big trouble."

In the US, much of the venture capital wing of "edubusiness," hungry for more and bigger profits, is now allied with Trump and Trumpism. Billionaire trader and TikTok investor Jeff Voss, who has made huge donations to Betsy DeVos, exemplifies what seems a new, surprising coalition. In fact historically it's a continuation: Since the late 19th century big business has joined anti-unionism with support of social reaction in defending its power and profits. Still, it would be a huge mistake to underestimate what we face with capital's open support to Trump and Trumpism, a horrifying, proto-

fascist mass movement headed by a demagogue, who have captured the GOP.

What's missing in liberal analysis of Agenda47 and Project 2025 is what's happened on our side since 2016. Powerful social movements drew hundreds of thousands of people, mostly young people, to the streets. A new generation has been radicalized. Another factor is internal divisions in the GOP alliance, especially in what capital and Trump and his followers want. The discussion this topic deserves about exploiting divisions on the Right takes me far beyond this article, but to defend public education we need to recognize the internal schism, some already articulated by Steve Bannon, the ideologue of Trumpism, who explains what the MAGA movement will want — bigger cuts in spending than Trump will make and "on artificial intelligence, we're virulently anti-A.I. I think big regulations have to come." Big cuts to education spending will mean less opportunity for edtech profit, as will regulations against AI. Loosening federal control over education through block grants to the states – returning pre-NCLB control of education to the states and districts – will destroy the national market needed for scale and profits. Rick Hess, the Far Right's friendliest (sounding) sales guy for its toxic policies, has already explained why eliminating the Department of Education and Title I won't happen.

FIGHTING SMART

One essential to win this fight is categorically rejecting the idea we can't fight the "culture wars." Aligning ourselves with movements against social oppression is not only a moral imperative, it's one of our most powerful strategies. The Right's "sudden obsession with race and gender in schools, as well as the ascendancy of book-banning efforts" is not "sudden" at all. Liberals often don't want to face that since the inception of mass public education public schools have been marked by inequalities of social class, race, gender, ability, as well as repression of teachers' rights on the job. These have been systemic inequalities, ameliorated but not eliminated by resilient opposition of social movements.

Educators' labor activism has already demonstrated how we can win. Social justice teachers unions in cities have been organizing successfully with community groups on issues Trump and the GOP love to hate. And the idea that there's an impossible urban/rural divide that should keep us from defending kids and truthful teaching was disproved by the "red state walkouts" in 2017, which electrified the country and altered the conversation about schools, educating colleagues and parents, many rural conservatives, in their militant movement. Educators broke the law by walking off the job, invaded state legislatures, fighting for more school funding. They reached out for support from labor, activists for single payer health care and the environment, and minority communities, joining defense of immigrant rights, anti-racism, and bilingual education to their struggle. The question is not whether to engage with Trumpism and big money front-groups, like Moms for Liberty, that pretend to represent parents about social values, but how to educate parents about why privatization can't be separated from Right wing attacks on being "woke," including virulent efforts to eliminate protections of young people's sexuality, rights of children with disabilities, teaching history that corresponds to fact, and efforts to undo the ugly reality of racism in schools.

The Democrats and GOP are surely not the same, a statement I put in bold letters because I anticipate it will be lost or misrepresented when my next idea is presented. Neither party can be relied on to save public education. Both are owned by powerful elites, not the people who vote for them, and certainly not teachers unions, which have watched while the political "friends" we have endorsed and elected allow conditions in classrooms to deteriorate, pay and pensions to be cut. In this election education activists and the entire left confront the political bankruptcy of labor's policy of "rewarding our friends, and punishing our enemies," epitomized by the ostensible practicality of the Gomperism, depicted as driving Teamster President O'Brien's speech at the GOP convention. O'Brien's behavior and the analysis defending it are a stunning misappraisal of the danger we face,

which comes not from robber barons of the Gilded Age, but from a racist demagogue who has a reciprocal relationship with a proto-fascist movement that has a program to turn back the clock to social conditions pre-Reconstruction.

What's a strategy to defeat the project powerful elites have for public education, while we determine how to build the electoral alternative we must have? Key is defeating the edtech behemoth. One is curricular guerilla war in classrooms, using teaching methods that subvert aims of edtech billionaires to control what is taught and how. We can publicize those ideas and build them. One task we need to address immediately is educating ourselves and parents about the harm that has occurred in accepting standardized tests and curricula embedded in software and platforms, content over which those most affected have no voice. Most teachers and parents can't recall a time when standardized tests didn't control curriculum and many don't know how the standards were set, or the harm they do to kids. Parent and teacher voice in curriculum is an issue the Right can exploit because our side has not made the case for democratic control of curriculum and how that upends aims of wealthy elites to control learning, while profiting from tax dollars and our children's data.

To carry out political education of educators and parents, we need to win the fight within teachers' unions for them to break from the liberal consensus that accepted the standards and testing as the basis of making the United States and individuals competitive in a global economy. It's important to understand that this same bipartisan political consensus about unions collaborating to support business bound autoworkers to concessions and give-backs, weakening their strength on the job, encouraging a union atrophy that has now been turned back by a national rank-and-file movement for union democracy and the president it helped elect, Shawn Fain. Our challenge is to do the same in the NEA and AFT, building a national reform movement and organization, led by locals elected by reform caucuses pledged to social justice. We have no time to wait.

Many educators and parents see deleterious effects of technology in classrooms; most pushback has come in looking at curriculum and policies about screen time and social media. While these count in protecting kids, discussion has to be broadened to what's not so apparent, the big political and economic picture and the project to use edtech to make profits and control what kids learn. As teachers have shown so well in their labor activism, we can use our teacher's voice, our credibility with parents, students, and communities to flag the dangers we confront – in both parties. We can use our collective strength as workers, in collective bargaining, in taking to the streets, and going to the halls of power. Markets are global, as is the flow of money and technological change. So are political ideas, seen in the rise internationally of far Right movements, with authoritarian demagogues, and the longstanding global attack on teaching, teachers, and their unions. Our opponents' project and power are global, and so must be our resistance. We have much to learn from each other. Teachers in Argentina are showing us how to fight if Trump is elected. Teachers in France are showing us we need to fight as workers if Harris wins, even if we turn back the GOP and Trumpism in November.

Our challenge as educators with all defenders of democracy is to speak truth to power. This is being done throughout the world, as authoritarian governments seize power and move to crush the force they know is one of the most powerful barriers to their exercise of control: teachers and their unions, aligned with social movements and unions that will fight with us.