

Teachers' jobs, paid for by cuts to food stamps – a victory?

The House of Representatives has passed a \$26 billion jobs bill, engineered by Democrats, that is aimed to save jobs of public employees, mainly teachers and help states pay for Medicaid health insurance. Funding will come from taxes on multinational corporations– and from slashing money for food stamps. Congressional Republicans lament that this is a “giveaway” to teachers unions. (The Republicans demand, instead, that we give taxpayer money to the wealthy and the transnational corporations. We expect this from Republicans, no?)

Of course the bill is giving money to schools and kids, not the unions. It's not a lot of money when you consider that the budget of the NYC schools alone was over \$1 billion last year. But it will help stave off disaster. Students in districts serving poor and working class families will probably be spared obscenely large classes of 40, 50 and more. The law is also a “giveaway” to tens of thousands of kids in more affluent school districts, who are losing “frills” that are a distant memory in urban schools: art, gym, music, sports, after-school programs. The Democrats protest that they included the cut to food stamps to get Republican votes and that they will win the food stamp funding back...somehow. But the real story is that liberal Democrats collapsed in their efforts to make the party support jobs AND foodstamps, as TheHill.com reports:

“House Democratic leaders had resisted earlier suggestions by the Obama administration to redirect food-stamp money to the jobs bill. The White House had noted that the 13.6 percent stimulus increase in food stamps was initially designed to last until 2014. It was going to last until 2018 because of

unexpectedly low food prices during the recession.

"Their line of argument was, well, the cost of food relative to what we thought it would be has come down, so people on food stamps are getting a pretty good deal in comparison to what we thought they were going to get," House Appropriations Chairman David Obey (D-Wis.) said in a Fiscal Times interview last month."

The Democratic Party makes no mention of the food stamp cuts. It calls the legislation a "a victory for cash-strapped states, parents, children and middle class families across our country." "Thank you, Congress!" crows the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The National Education Association (NEA) is just a tad less sycophantic about bill's passage, but its story gushes praise for the Democrats too -and fails to mention the food stamp cuts. The AAUP, (the American Association of University Professors) notes, correctly, that post-secondary education was short-changed in the bill and that public higher education is a right. Still, it mentions nothing about the food stamp provision when it calls for Congress "to similarly attend to maintaining and building human capacity in postsecondary education."

The NEA and AFT have allowed the Democrats to save teachers' jobs by, quite literally, stealing food from children. The bill is a giveaway to the unions only if you think that teacher unions can defeat the neoliberal onslaught by sticking to the old "bread and butter" unionism they have practiced for decades. The 140,000 saved jobs came at a very steep political cost: Teachers unions have lost legitimacy as a force capable of mounting a meaningful challenge to the barbarism that demands that kids go hungry to pay for teacher salaries.