Teachers unions and the pandemic: Fighting for life and facing neoliberalism's new bipartisan push

written by Lois Weiner | December 14, 2020

Randi Weingarten: Always thought we could reopen schools with 'safeguards'

(Editor's note: Shortly after this piece appeared, Biden selected Miguel Cardona to be Secretary of Education. Weiner's analysis of what the movement can expect and demand from Cardona can be found here.)

Teachers' activism since the pandemic began has focused on COVID-19's deadly dangers, for all who use and work in schools. The GOP, Trump, and DeVos, once champions of online learning, in charter schools, suddenly reversed themselves, demanding face-to-face instruction everywhere, a stance that paralleled Trumpism's disavowal of scientific evidence for how to save lives being lost to COVID-19. The most comprehensive movement for school safety and economic and racial justice among teacher union activists, demanding "safe, quality, equitable" schools, has been navigating the complex, often contradictory needs of students, parents, and teachers. Still, as one Black teachers union president with deep personal roots in his low-income, BIPOC community told me, all of the options in school reopenings are harmful for some children, especially those who are most vulnerable because of historic social, political, and economic realities.

Some children and parents are in desperate need of provisions for safe face-to-face instruction; for some reducing the risk of contagion is literally a matter of life and death; other families are taking remote learning in stride, especially if they have resources to set up private "pods"; many students find remote instruction, especially when it is carried out poorly, unmitigated drudgery – they need the social interactions with friends and teachers in school; parents who care deeply about their children's academic success may lack the knowledge, skills, time, or energy to supervise online work. Hence even democratic unions committed to social justice have been squeezed to choose among options that fail to serve students well, for different reasons. Facing challenges of teaching remotely, returning to school buildings that are not safe, or both, teachers are exhausted beyond what they thought possible, bashed for expressing, let alone acting on their right to work in safe environments.

The context missed in most analyses of teachers' responses to the pandemic is how AFT and NEA, as well as the state affiliates in thrall to the national unions, undermined local struggles by failing to mobilize members nationally last Spring, when it was clear the pandemic would not disappear. NEA

and AFT needed to fight for what one education policy analyst has noted as the missing "widespread and significant" federal money and support for equitable re-openings. Public schools, especially those with the highest concentrations of low-income BIPOC children, needed what affluent private schools (and mostly white, wealthy suburban school districts) provided their teachers and students: practical high-quality professional development in how to shift to online instruction; serious investment to make school buildings safe environments; mechanisms for parents, students, and teachers to identify resources they needed to succeed, like counselors, social workers, and nurses – and those they don't, like police and metal detectors. In the absence of national mobilization by the NEA and AFT, for example organizing for a one day "sick out" before reopenings, billionaires have used their clout in both parties to exploit the pandemic for profit and power, exacerbating pre-existing racial and economic inequality in schools.

Even worse, NEA and AFT have helped pave the way for the newest threat to public education, intensification of privatization with education technology, in particular the widespread use of proprietary software, like Summit Learning, and the five biggest platforms, Google, Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, and Facebook, that mine student data and introduce chilling forms of surveillance that deepen the school-to-prison pipeline. Many of the dire warnings about increased racial and economic educational inequality from the pandemic come from sources funded by ed tech moguls and advocate seemingly objective solutions that, in fact, deepen (unregulated) data collection throughout the social services and public health, in "private/public" partnerships – the code for privatization. One need only do a fast check the sources of funding for technology "freebies" schools promote to grasp the extent big, dark money permeates the curriculum already. The pandemic has been a dream come true for the alliance of capitalist elites in Silicon Valley and Wall Street.

Silicon Valley, Wall Street, and the New Bipartisan Neoliberal Project in Education

"Teachers unions should be all over this," researcher Ben Williamson has observed, sounding an alarm about the dangerous ascendancy of vendor corporations, tech industry trade associations, venture capitalists, and venture philanthropists determining the future of education. Yet, or the past six years, AFT and NEA have collaborated in what one teacher-blogger descried as a betrayal of the profession and students, joining ed tech moguls in embracing edu tech's project of "personalized learning" and "social and emotional development," which hijacks rhetoric of progressive education to mine student data, replacing rubrics ed tech corporations develop with assessments teachers develop based on their observations of students' real needs. Most recently AFT and NEA unions have partnered with tech billionaires and the foundations they fund in "Education Reimagined." Unbeknownst to most union activists, the pandemic recovery CARES act, praised uncritically by NEA and AFT, pushes money away "bricks and mortar" schools for "distance learning" software controlled by corporations. What has been called "platform capitalism" is colonizing education, tapping networks of finance, media, and policy to pursue billionaires' vision about the future of education and the economy, disempowering those who rely on – and should control – public schools. New York Governor Cuomo's invitation to Bill Gates to "reimagine" public education in New York – without schools – shows the tentacles of the project, in ways only a small group of parents and teachers noticed until recently.

Liberal media and pundits have encouraged expectations Biden will reverse Trump's educational policies, pointing to progressive promises, including increased education spending, opposition to Trump/DeVos regulations on sexual harassment, a pledge to name an educator as Secretary of Education, with NEA or AFT presidents names floated, as well as Biden's support for labor reform. Biden will reverse the most egregious of Trump/DeVos policies, especially those related to the Trumpism's allegiance to social conservativism, like funding religious schools, and he may well endorse tighter regulations on for-profit schools. But he will not reverse the inroads of charter schools, privatization of services, and data collection, including the use of standardized tests to

measure school and student learning. The footprint of Biden's education policies is demonstrated by his appointees. At the same time Biden will resurrect a new, even more damaging version of the bipartisan project in education that began with Bush and was pushed by Clinton and Obama. One chilling portent is Biden's tapping Neera Tanden for a key role in his administration. Tanden helped create the of the Clinton/Podesta Center for American Progress (CAP), which has issued a report, not only endorsing the Trump administration's refusal to grant waivers for standardized testing during the pandemic , but asserting the need for even more testing. CAP's recommendation is especially noteworthy because even much of the Right concedes standardized testing has failed to improve educational outcomes and equalize educational opportunity.

Biden assumes the presidency in a political environment upended by Trumpism on the right and the emergence of an energetic socialist left. Biden can't resurrect the bipartisan project as it was, nor does the capitalist elite want an identical replication: The pandemic has created new opportunities for profit and control. Biden will endorse the old normal Obama handed to Trump, but he will also push profiteering and control of education through technology, a project supported by both Democrats and the GOP from the start of Trump's administration. Only one Trump nominee for the Department of Education, Scott Strump, assistant secretary for career, technical, and adult education, was approved by the GOP, all the Democrats, and even Bernie Sanders. Strump's background in "workforce development and education" captures the program we should be prepared to fight under Biden: Improving the economy and workers' access to good jobs through online learning, especially vocationalizing community colleges, with business titans determining what workers – and students – need to know.

A rosy report issued by a project at MIT on technology, work, and education, funded by a "who's who" of Wall Street and Silicon Valley, including JP Morgan Chase, and Google, along with liberal foundations, like the Ford Foundation, and labor officials, lays out the new bipartisan plan for education and the economy: Workers needn't worry about unemployment if we use educational technology "to link skills training to business demand." However, as did the Obama administration's (now) discredited claim about education being the one true path out of poverty, the new bipartisan push denies staggering levels of unemployment, enormously heightened in the pandemic. This economic reality will not, cannot be changed with education, not even the kind of workforce education we would want to see, when unions develop apprenticeship programs that end with jobs that promote a sustainable planet. Education cannot substitute for government programs that create jobs, programs Biden, the Democratic Party, and too much of labor officialdom, including the AFT, reject, like the Green New Deal and Medicare for All.

Embracing this new bipartisan project, as AFT and NEA did when they pushed standardized testing and teachers' pay and performance evaluated by student test scores as a way to end inequality in education, will alienate and anger classroom teachers experiencing a further erosion to their professional autonomy and working conditions. Pleading with Biden to live up to his campaign promises misses what's needed – **organizing for the threat we actually face – from his administration.** When reformers argue "Government at all levels has given billions to corporations in the name of recovery. School communities require the same investment" they implicitly cede territory we need to reclaim, allowing the government to give handouts to the corporations as long as schools get their share. The movement's demands to end segregation and equalize educational outcomes are essential and to be realized need to be fused with exposing and ending the deterioration in teaching conditions that have occurred in the pandemic, conditions that cannot be separated from the privatization that has already occurred and is being intensified.

Rewriting the history of the national teachers unions to make them appear militant may make the unions more palatable to liberals who want to support public education but are worried about how to navigate conflicts with communities of color. However, white washing the national and city unions

tragic confrontations over race and racism during the 1970s, especially in New York City, and ignoring the leadership of rank and file activists, many of whom came from social movements and had to deal with betrayals of their state unions in the "red state" walkouts, reveals the AFT and NEA have learned nothing substantive from their mistakes.

What should union reformers be doing now? The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) provides a model again, as it did for the Caucus of Rank and File Educators in the Chicago Teachers Union, in organizing to roll back and stop privatization and corporate control of schools. Long a model of defending both social justice and rank and file activism with robust democracy, the BCTF has addressed its government's attempts to impose the new, global iteration of the neoliberal project by tapping members' insights and dissatisfactions about their work (and students' learning), connecting critical research about capitalism's newest global project for school and work with knowledge of what teachers need to better serve students. The synergy of members' knowledge and needs is combined with insights from research about the international picture and alliances with longtime allies and new advocacy groups about students' rights to privacy and data mining. This potent combination drives the BCTF's organizing and its resistance to imposition of reforms from powerful elites and the world financial organizations they control.

One savvy activist reading an earlier version of this article asked me "Why is the issue of educational technology so vital now, with all else that is going on?" The answer is timing. Trump's brutal administration intensified privatization but it also disrupted the bipartisanship that fueled the neoliberal project in educational policy through three presidencies. We have a small window to organize against what Biden will do, against the project already taking form, a project both unions are supporting. Union activists embroiled in battles on their home turf to keep people physically safe have been overwhelmed, fighting for the adoption of online learning but blindsided by the ways they are simultaneously enabling our enemies' newest push.

We need to seize this moment **to demand new, stringent regulation and control** over the project ed tech corporations and moguls have already started, under our noses. Teachers need to educate, agitate, and organize on this issue, as they have done so courageously in the past decade, to protect public education, despite the misleadership of AFT and NEA.

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This article is adapted from research I have done for a book chapter to be published in late 2021. New Politics provides this website for timely, informed, left analysis you often won't find outside of academic publications. Help us to continue this by subscribing or donating – or both.