

Billionaire-backed education “reform” organizations attack California teachers

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The coming year will witness multiple attempts—in the form of lawsuits, ballot initiatives and state-sponsored legislation—all of which are aimed at removing job protections and democratic rights for teachers. The aim of these initiatives is to punish teachers and students for the crisis of capitalism and funnel ever-greater amounts of public funds meant for public education into the pockets of the ultra-rich.

Billionaire-backed education reform groups, having failed to enshrine antidemocratic teacher dismissal procedures into law using the state legislature, are now seeking approval for two ballot measures which, if passed in the November 2014 election, would lead to mass teacher layoffs and lay the foundation for further public school closings and charter conversions.

The first measure, proposed by the organization *EdVoice*, makes use of recent teacher sexual abuse scandals to create a two-tier dismissal process for teachers. In a blatant attack on democratic rights, those teachers accused of more egregious types of misconduct would actually be subject to an accelerated dismissal procedure regardless of any actual legal findings or the veracity of the accusations made against them. *EdVoice* is among a number of pro-charter school organizations operating in California backed by large corporate interests. The group was founded in 2001 by Reed Hastings, founder and CEO of *Netflix* and also a founding member of Green Dot charter schools, which is among the largest charter school operators in the state. Also active in the organization’s founding were Los Angeles billionaire Eli Broad, former *GAP* CEO Don Fisher and former state assembly members Ted Lempert and Steve Poizner, the latter of whom mounted an unsuccessful gubernatorial campaign in 2010. The group receives significant backing both from the individuals above as well as the Walton Family Foundation.

Bill Lucia, former executive director of the state board of education and current president of *EdVoice*, made the ballot initiative’s antidemocratic aims explicit in a recent comment to the *Sacramento Bee*: “As we’ve witnessed over the last two or three legislative cycles, the Legislature has gotten caught up in trying to make the issue of improving the law contingent on treating everyone the same,” he said. According to Lucia, the proposal draws a “bright line about the type of the more

egregious version of misconduct.”

The proposal makes clear the antidemocratic character of the “education reform” movement, backed by billionaires and the Democratic Party.

The initiative would allow dismissal hearings involving more severe types of misconduct to be conducted solely by an administrative law judge. It would also make the accused teacher responsible for all legal fees involved with any appeal regardless of outcome. Written charges against teachers could also be continuously amended during the course of the hearing. Complaints, reprimands, punishments and other disciplinary actions would become a permanent part of teachers’ personnel records regardless of their actual validity or length of time passed.

The initiative arrives on the heels of Assembly Bill 375, a similar measure that had passed the state legislature before being vetoed by the governor in late 2013. AB 375 mandated the completion of all dismissal cases within a period of 7 months, would have restricted teachers’ right of appeal to the administrative court itself and would have allowed teachers to be suspended from their positions at any time of year.

Despite the failure of AB 375, the education reform movement was still able to garner significant anti-teacher victories during the course of the year, including the passage of Assembly Bill 449.

AB 449, also known as the California Teacher Accountability Bill, (see “California state legislature passes new attack on teachers”) punishes school superintendents who do not report teachers who are disciplined or found guilty of misconduct to the state credentialing board within 30 days, which effectively bars them from future work as teachers.

Both of these reactionary bills received full support from the state’s teachers unions.

The California Teachers Association (CTA) issued a press release in 2012 fully supporting the passage of AB 375. It read, in part, “CTA supports streamlining and expediting the dismissal process to keep students safe and safeguard the integrity of the profession.” The union’s press release also brazenly claimed that the bill would “protect the rights of educators.”

As far as AB 449 was concerned, the CTA applauded it as

well, claiming it “will go far in ensuring that persons who pose a threat to students will be removed from the classroom and barred from working in any school in the state.” The United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), representing teachers in the state’s largest school district, also welcomed the bill, as it would, according to UTLA president Warren Fletcher, “ensure district superintendents are held accountable.”

Last month, the UTLA also staged candlelight protests against so-called “teacher jails”—a system in Los Angeles schools which removes teachers facing charges from classrooms at their regular salaries while disciplinary proceedings are underway. Aside from claiming that the teacher jails were a form of “harassment,” the union provided no justification for its decision to launch the protests. Given the protests’ timing, however, one can fairly infer that they’re meant to confuse and disorient membership so that quicker teacher dismissal procedures can be put in place instead.

In addition to the *EdVoice* proposal, a consulting firm associated with former Washington DC School Chancellor and current head of the anti-teacher *Students First* organization Michelle Rhee, is advancing another. This proposal, which also contains teacher dismissal language similar to the *EdVoice* plan, seeks to remove seniority and teacher tenure as a factor when school districts fire teachers. The measure would base such decisions solely on teacher performance evaluations and student test scores. *Students First* attempted to push a similar measure through the California Legislature in 2012 before that bill died in committee. One of the bill’s champions in the state senate was Ron Calderon, currently the subject of an FBI inquiry into claims that he has accepted more than \$88,000 in bribes from hospital executives and film studio heads.

The ballot proposal is in line with the political mission of *Students First* and other billionaire-backed education reform organizations to end teacher tenure and depress wages.

Should the bill fail to make it onto the November ballot or should voters reject it, other avenues are vigorously being pursued.

One of these is a lawsuit scheduled to be heard in the California Superior Court of Los Angeles County on January 24. *Vergara v. California* would strike down five provisions of the state’s education code related to teacher dismissal including teacher tenure provisions. The lawsuit is being initiated by *Students Matter*, a group created by the education reform movement for the purpose of litigating attacks against teachers and public education.

The law firm of Gibson, Dunn and Crutcher, which represents *Students Matter*, claims the continued presence of underperforming teachers in public schools represents a violation of equal educational opportunities for children as individual teacher effectiveness is considered to be the only significant factor in determining students’ educational and career outcomes.

Entirely absent from the proposals of *EdVoice*, *Students First*,

and *Students Matter*, is any mention of billions in cuts to public education, increased class sizes and massive financial hardship for working-class students and families making a quality education nearly unrealizable for all but the children of the very wealthy.

The idea that these initiatives are being launched out of concern for children is a colossal and absurd fraud. Private schools and charters stand to gain billions from new legislation passed at the state and federal level. The Obama Administration’s Race to Top Initiative along with its newly created “Economic Promise Zones” are designed to pump billions of dollars into school districts which implement such anti-teacher initiatives providing a financial bonanza for charter schools in those areas.

Similarly, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) of state Governor Jerry Brown is poised to bring in nearly \$2 billion in the next fiscal year into economically depressed school districts with little state oversight over how the money is being spent. The implementation of the LCFF is based around the same anti-teacher agenda as promoted by the education reform groups. It will mean a full-scale assault against teacher and school staff salaries. For all of its railing against ineffective teachers, the education reform movement and its backers in the Democratic Party rarely, if ever, discuss plans to train and hire effective teachers as an alternative.

Teachers have no friends within the Democratic Party and their own trade unions are making every effort to implement and buttress the political attacks against them. They must organize completely independently of the Democrats and the unions and organize with other sections of the working class both in the United States and internationally to break the stranglehold of profit over education. This is the only way forward for teachers and student youth.



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