

How (not) to push back on the power elite's destruction of public education

August 20, 2013

A former PR apparatchik in the US Dept. of Education (DOE) in Obama's first term, Paul Cunningham, has penned a snarky attack on Diane Ravitch, the best known liberal opponent of the bipartisan "reforms" of public education that are destroying it.

Beyond revealing that the DOE "monitors criticism" Cunningham's "rant" is fairly dull. However, what's worth noting is that he tries to cast Ravitch as someone who doesn't care about inequality in schools because she says that not all kids should have to attend college.

Ravitch's point is one I made in an article outlining a program for progressive education reform, but I argue we have to make sure that as a society we maintain options for people to enroll in free, quality public higher education when they mature and/or want it. Many years ago, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) created such a proposal, modeled on Medicare. (AFT dropped the program, fast.) We also have to create good-paying jobs that allow kids who aren't interested in academics to support themselves and their families.

One trope of the White progressive pushback has been that there was no crisis in education until the most recent wave of corporate school reform. That argument won't cut it with parents and community who couldn't find a local school they trusted, whose kids were told by counselors that they weren't college material. While teachers cannot be held responsible for the structural inequality in schools, well-documented by a generation of sociologists and anthropologists, we must start our critique by acknowledging that many public schools did not serve poor kids of color well. Inequality has been exploited by powerful elites who aim to marketize public education, eliminate democratic oversight, turn teaching into contract labor, and destroy teachers unions (perhaps allowing them to remain as dues-collectors but without any clout.) To defeat them we must be forthright that there was no "golden age" to which we can return. Unequal schools are imbedded in an unequal society, and we have to face that uncomfortable (for liberals) reality.

We are finally starting to see democratic stirrings within the teachers unions, inspired by events in Chicago. Reformers gathered in early August in Chicago to strategize about transforming the unions. The President of the National Union of Teachers in the UK, which this autumn will hold a joint national strike with the second largest UK teachers union, spoke to the group. Together these unions represent the vast majority of UK teachers. We're finally seeing formation of a new global network of teacher union activists. Bravo! (I'll discuss this in my Labor Day article in The Jacobin.)

Another promising development is Barbara Madeloni's campaign for President of the Mass. Teachers Association, the state affiliate of the National Education Association. She is using the campaign to spark formation of a caucus of members to create a social movement union. They have a great program. I've made my check to the campaign (payable to The Committee to Elect Barbara Madeloni) and mailed it to The Committee to Elect Barbara Madeloni, 43 Munroe Street, Northampton, MA 01060. I hope you do the same.

You can follow me on teaching, schools, and education on twitter , Facebook, as well as my blog at New Politics. Look for that new piece in The Jacobin, on Labor Day.