

Billionaires Unite! Against Public Education and Teachers

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In less than a week two billionaires have joined the anti-teacher “Billionaires Club”: a group of ultra-wealthy individuals hell-bent on destroying public education and teachers’ unions. The newest members of the club are Oprah Winfrey and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg.

Winfrey has used her show — twice in one week — as a platform against public education. She first hosted billionaire Bill Gates to discuss his “philanthropy” in education, as he promoted the new anti-public education propaganda film *Waiting for Superman*.

Waiting for Superman is a “documentary” focused on the types of anti-teacher school “reforms” desired by the Billionaires Club, who have used their tremendous wealth to blackmail school districts and states to institute their policies.

For example, the Facebook founder’s donation of \$100 million to the Newark, New Jersey school district will almost certainly require — according to *The New York Times* — that the school institute these reforms, much like Bill Gates’ donation of \$100 million to the Tampa Hillsborough County School District — and the \$90 million to the Memphis school district — had the same types of strings attached.

What are the conditions for receiving this “charity” of billionaires? It’s the same demands for receiving money from the federal government under Obama’s badly-named *Race to the Top* program: creating more privately administered — or for profit — Charter schools; connecting teacher’s pay with student test scores (merit pay); undermining the seniority of teachers; and other tricks to dis-empower teachers and public education.

Diane Ravitch, a former corporate-school reformer, has now dedicated her time to exposing the motives of the super-rich and their new-found interest in “reforming” public education. In her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Ravitch entitles a chapter “The Billionaires Boys Club.” On the radio show *Democracy Now!* Ravitch summarized the chapter:

“The Billionaires Boys Club is a discussion of how we’re in a new era of the [billionaire] foundations and their relation to education. We have never in the history of the United States had foundations with the wealth of the Gates Foundation and some of the other billionaire foundations — the Walton Family Foundation, The Broad Foundation. And these three foundations — Gates, Broad and Walton — are committed now to charter schools and to evaluating teachers by test scores. And that’s now the policy of the U.S. Department of Education. We have never seen anything like this, where foundations had the ambition to

direct national educational policy, and in fact are succeeding.”

There are some key motives for billionaires to jump in a coalition with this singular focus, none of them well meaning.

1) There are unknown billions in profits to be made in privatizing public education, either in the private administration of schools, curriculum companies, or wholly for-profit schools. There has been much talk in the investor world of this new “market.” In addition, the New York Daily News reported: “Wealthy investors and major banks have been making windfall profits by using a little-known federal tax break to finance new charter-school construction. The program, the New Markets Tax Credit, is so lucrative that a lender who uses it can almost double his money in seven years.” (May 5, 2010).

http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/education/2010/05/07/2010-05

2) The super-rich hate taxes. They would rather not pay taxes towards public education when they could instead invest their money in private schools and reap profits.

3) Billionaires hate unions (they didn’t become billionaires by paying union wages): The biggest obstacle towards privatizing public education is the powerful teachers’ unions. Teacher unions are also the strongest segment of the labor movement, and thus the most powerful grouping in the U.S. working class, able to fight back most effectively against corporate school reform— the billionaires’ natural enemies.

The super-rich attacked first in this battle between teachers and billionaires. The teachers must defend themselves. Shamefully, certain segments of the teachers’ unions are having troubles labeling their attackers as enemies.

For example, the President of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Randy Weingarten, sent a friendly invitation to Bill Gates to address the AFT convention, where Gates was allowed to deceive the teachers about the intentions of his multi-billion dollar “investment” in “reforming” education.

Gates’ ideas about education — blaming teachers for everything — ignores what most teachers already know: the main predictor for a student’s success is social-economic background. Rich students outperform poor students for many different reasons: less stress, more resources, parental help, etc. Ignoring this obvious fact exposes the billionaires’ profit motive behind their fake charity.

Teachers must fight back. They cannot allow the media to frame the debate with the ideas of the corporate think tanks and foundations. Teachers cannot concede on the issues that help keep their unions powerful, such as seniority; merit pay must be defeated for the same reasons.

If the teachers’ unions combined with other public sector unions, parent associations, and the community at large to demand FULLY FUNDED PUBLIC EDUCATION by TAXING THE RICH, the billionaires would find themselves without allies. Their money might then be put towards something useful.

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