

The Breakdown of Capitalism and the Fight for Socialism in the United States Program of the Socialist Equality Party

Part three

The decay of the schools, combined with the social crisis, has led to a surge of high school dropouts. The inevitable result is a decline in educational achievement.

73. The catastrophe facing the public schools is the product of three decades of attacks and budget-cutting, as well as the privatization of school services, the draining of public resources into for-profit schools, and the proliferation of "performance-based" testing. These have been combined with an assault on the separation of church and state through the introduction of religious indoctrination into the schools in place of the teaching of evolution, cosmology and other sciences. Obama's "Race to the Top" program has deepened the right-wing policies promoted by the bipartisan "No Child Left Behind Act," signed into law by Bush. Districts are pushed to compete for meager funds by expanding charter schools, firing teachers at "underperforming schools" or shutting these schools down altogether.

74. While education in the US has always been plagued by inequality, the expansion of American democracy was accompanied by increasing access to education—including the introduction of public education following the American Revolution, the expansion of public high school education spearheaded by reformer Horace Mann, the extension of education to African-Americans after the Civil War, and desegregation in the 20th century. These earlier reforms are now being reversed. It is precisely the

egalitarian aspect of public education that makes it the target of the right-wing politicians and the corporate interests they represent.

75. At the college and university level, young workers are increasingly priced out of access to education, or forced to take out tens of thousands of dollars in loans to pay outrageous tuition costs. Students graduating with a bachelor's degree from public four-year institutions owe on average \$20,000 in debt, even as they face an increasingly bleak employment outlook. Total college student loan debt is approaching \$1 trillion, and exceeds total credit card debt. This debt should be abolished.

76. All discussion of equality in a society where access to education is largely determined by income is a fraud. A public works program must include a plan to hire tens of thousands of teachers and staff at quality wages and benefits, reduce class sizes, repair older schools and build new ones, and equip all schools with the most up-to-date books and learning technology. Higher education, including continuing education for adult workers, is a necessity in modern society and must be guaranteed to all free of charge.

The right to a healthy and safe environment

77. The health and well-being of humanity depends on a healthy environment. However, addressing environmental degradation is impossible in a society in which every decision is dictated by the pursuit of profit.

78. The oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico has destroyed the

economic and environmental basis of the entire region. It is a graphic expression of the deadly consequences of deregulation, corporate cost-cutting, and the reckless pursuit of profit by giant corporations. In the face of the greatest environmental catastrophe in US history, the Obama administration has left everything in the hands of BP, unconditionally defended the profit interests of the company, and held no one accountable. The immediate victims of the disaster—workers and small business owners in the Gulf region—will receive grossly inadequate compensation for the devastation of their livelihoods.

79. Among the many environmental disasters confronting mankind—including pollution of cities and waterways, the devastation of rainforests and coastal regions and the destruction of biological diversity—perhaps the most dangerous is global warming, which threatens to disrupt the world's climate, destroying agricultural production, increasing the spread of diseases, and jeopardizing all life on the planet. Despite urgent warnings from world scientists, capitalist governments the world over are incapable of responding. Even inadequate international treaties such as the Kyoto Protocol are now declared unfeasible.

80. An emergency response to the environmental catastrophe must begin with the expropriation of the global energy giants under the democratic control of the working class. This is the necessary first step in the implementa-

tion of a rational global plan for the production of energy in a way that can meet social needs while protecting the environment, including a massive social investment in alternative forms of energy and public transportation. The expropriation of these companies will also free up resources to ensure that regions affected by environmental disasters are restored and those who have seen their livelihoods destroyed, including by the BP oil spill, are made whole.

81. Included in the right to a healthy environment is the right to a safe work environment. Decades of cost-cutting and government deregulation have made for an increasingly treacherous workplace, from stress disorders affecting about 1 million workers a year to deadly accidents like the Upper Big Branch mine explosion that killed 29 miners in the worst coal mining disaster in 40 years. The capitalist system treats workers as disposable commodities, whose injury or even death is of little consequence measured against the relentless drive for profit and individual wealth accumulation.

The right to culture

82. Access to art and culture is a basic component of a healthy society. Yet, like everything else, it is under relentless attack. American culture—film, television, music—was once a pole of attraction because of its innovation and powerful democratic and humanistic spirit. The subordination of culture to the profit motive has led to an immense degeneration.

83. Culture has suffered from funding cuts for the arts, a right-wing ideological assault on artistic expression, and the general brutalization of American society. Government subsidies to museums, orchestras, theaters and public television and radio have been gutted. Art and music education has been drastically curtailed or eliminated outright from most public schools. Library hours and services have been scaled back, and education funding cuts have included the closure of school libraries. The media, owned by giant corporations, function as mouthpieces of the government and the wealthy, polluting public airways and spreading lies. The damage to the intellectual and moral fabric of society resulting from such a mercenary and philistine approach is impossible to quantify.

84. To enable all working people to have full access to art and culture requires massive public funding and the creation of new schools and centers for music, dance, drama and art, either at a nominal fee or for free. Decisions on subsidies and grants for the arts must be taken out of the hands of the politicians and bureaucrats and placed under the control of committees of artists, musicians and other cultural workers.

85. The social rights enumerated above represent the essential needs of the working class. But it would be utopian to believe that they can be achieved without a fundamental reorganization of economic power and the redistribution of wealth within the United States. The Socialist Equality Party states openly that the realization of these rights requires a frontal assault on the hitherto unchallenged preroga-

tives of the corporations and the rich. The vast wealth created by the labor of generations of workers must be taken out of the hands of a privileged few and put at the disposal of the people as a whole. Workers will achieve nothing if they seek to avoid such a direct attack on the economic and political power of the capitalist class. Accordingly, the SEP raises a series of additional demands that arise logically from the fight for the social rights of working people. These demands include:

For the expropriation of the banks and financial institutions

86. All the basic needs of the working class come into immediate and direct conflict with the dictatorship of the giant banks and financial institutions over every aspect of political and economic life. These corporations, the commanding heights of the economy, control vast social resources, the product of the collective labor of billions of people all over the world. These immense sums are employed not to benefit society, but to increase the wealth of a tiny layer, buy off governments and dictate policies.

87. Over the past 40 years, the power of the banks in the US has grown enormously. A wave of finance-driven corporate consolidation during this period has been used to slash wages, downsize companies and raid pension and health care funds. The stock market boom of the 1990s was accompanied by an ever more obsessive focus on the immediate return on investment for Wall Street. This often proceeded alongside, and was in fact dependent upon, the destruction of the real productive forces, the shutting down of factories and the elimination of jobs.

88. This parasitism of the financial aristocracy, whose wealth is increasingly divorced from the production of real value, was a principal factor behind the financial meltdown of 2008. In some cases, as in Goldman Sachs' bets on the collapse of the housing market, the crisis was deliberately provoked in order to transfer wealth into the hands of Wall Street speculators. The gospel of the "free market" did not prevent the banks and their political representatives from looting the public treasury to guarantee the bad debts of the financial aristocracy. These debts, transferred to government balance sheets, are now to be paid through cuts in critical social programs.

89. The actions taken by the financial elite and its political representatives in response to the crisis have vastly expanded the power of the banks. Thanks to a series of bank failures, the top four commercial banks in the US—Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America and Wells Fargo—now control about 70 percent of the country's bank assets, up from less than 50 percent at the end of 2000.

90. There is not a single social need that can be met so long as these institutions remain under private control. The banks and other big financial institutions must be expropriated, with full protection for small depositors, placed under public ownership, and operated under the democratic control of the working class. This will make

available enormous resources for a public works program to eliminate poverty and meet social needs in the US and internationally.

For the nationalization of major corporations

91. Next to the banks stand the giant corporations. The extent of monopolization in the US is greater than at any point in history. Decades of deregulation and corporate consolidation have created conditions in which a few massive businesses—such as ExxonMobil and ChevronTexaco in energy, Archer Daniels Midland and Monsanto in agribusiness, Johnson & Johnson and Pfizer in pharmaceuticals, and Microsoft, Apple, Google and Intel in computer technology—dominate markets, dictate government policy, and exploit hundreds of thousands of workers around the world.

92. The claim that these giant corporations are most efficiently run when under private control is a fraud. These corporations work tirelessly to defend their own narrow interests at the expense of society as a whole—from preventing the development of alternative sources of energy and public transportation, to maintaining monopolies in computer operating systems.

93. All privately owned industrial, manufacturing and information technology corporations valued at \$10 billion or more must be transformed into publicly owned enterprises, with full compensation for small shareholders and guarantees for all pension and health care fund investments. Industries critical to the basic functioning of society—including telecommunications, agriculture, education, health care and transportation—must also be subject to public ownership and democratic control.

94. This does not mean the nationalization of everything. Small and medium-sized businesses, which employ millions of workers, are themselves in desperate need of reliable sources of credit and relief from the unfair monopolistic practices of the large corporations.

For workers control

95. The expropriation of the banks and corporations must be accompanied by the establishment of genuine democratic control over production. This is the necessary basis for the development of a rational plan of global production and distribution to replace the anarchy of the capitalist market and ensure that all decisions are based on social need.

96. The aim of socialist policy is not to replace capitalist financiers with unaccountable bureaucrats. Industrial democracy means real control by working people over their working lives. What is democratic about a system in which the place where most people spend the bulk of their time—the work place—is run as a dictatorship? Decisions affecting conditions of work, safety, salaries, hiring and hours must be subject to the democratic voice of the workforce. This presupposes the opening of the books of all corporations for inspection by the workers and the broader public, and the ratification of corporate leadership by a democratic vote of all employees.

To be continued

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