

School privatization critic Diane Ravitch offers advice to the Democrats

By Nancy Hanover
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Diane Ravitch, the widely read education historian, author and advocate for public education, titled a May 23 blog, “Don’t Like Betsy DeVos? Blame the Democrats.” The full-length opinion piece was also published the same day in *New Republic* with the underline “The Democratic Party paved the way for the education secretary’s efforts to privatize our public schools.”

For those who might think to themselves, “Finally the truth at last!” there is more to the story. Ravitch aims not to discredit the Democratic Party, let alone encourage a political break from this party of Wall Street and war, but to advise it.

The article states that Trump administration Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has generated “a tsunami of liberal outrage” for good reason. Ravitch emphasizes that the secretary is hostile to the very idea of public education. Indeed, Trump’s budget proposals demand \$10.6 billion in cuts, measures that could deny tens of thousands of young people the chance to go to college, put the community college system on rations and slash K-12 school programs across the country. The day prior to the release of the budget, DeVos promised “the most ambitious expansion of education choice in our nation’s history.”

Ravitch’s article then refers to the stage-managed “grilling” of DeVos by Senator Al Franken at her confirmation hearings, and the reaction of other Democrats like Senators Cory Booker and Michael Bennet who decried her nomination as an “insult” to the nation’s children.

“Listening to their cries of outrage, one might imagine that Democrats were America’s undisputed champions of public education,” Ravitch says. “But the resistance to DeVos obscured an inconvenient truth: Democrats have been promoting a conservative ‘school reform’ agenda for the past three decades,” she states.

The education historian substantiates this by briefly reviewing the record, starting with the support of Bill Clinton for standardized metrics linked to monetary rewards, which ultimately laid the groundwork for No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top.

As usual, Ravitch does not spare Obama. “The Obama years saw an epidemic of new charters, testing, school closings and teacher firings. In Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel closed 50 public schools in one day. Democratic charter advocates—whose ranks include the outraged Booker and Bennet—have increasingly imported ‘school choice’ into the party’s rhetoric,” she states.

She hones in on the money trail: “[S]upport for mandatory

testing and charter schools opens fat wallets on Wall Street. ... In 2005, Obama served as the featured speaker at the inaugural gathering of Democrats for Education Reform, which bundles contributions to Democrats who back charter schools: Among its favorites have been those sharp DeVos critics George Miller, Michael Bennet, and Cory Booker.”

Ravitch’s narrative highlights the hypocrisy of the Democratic Party, its open alliance with Wall Street hedge funds and its thoroughly reactionary attacks on public education in the interest of profit-taking.

The problem with her argument, however, is the “inconvenient fact” that Ravitch has been an unswerving supporter of the Democratic Party every step of the way. This included supporting Obama twice, Hillary Clinton in 2016, and countless other regional and local Democrats.

She called Obama’s Race To The Top “disastrous” and “demoralizing,” but formally endorsed him. Ravitch stated about Clinton: “I am supporting her vigorously in this election but have no idea what she will do about K12 education.”

As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words. Despite the brutal cuts assented to by the Democrats, despite their entrenched alliance with Wall Street privatizers—Ravitch continues to back them and encourage her supporters, through the Network for Public Education, to back them. In other words, Ravitch is also culpable for “paving the way” for DeVos, both in fact and by her very own arguments.

But why? There is a certain contradiction. The 78-year-old academic/policy analyst has a substantial record of sticking her neck out in defense of public education, producing among the most well-known and consistent series of exposures on privatization nationally.

An honest observer can only conclude, however, that she is *more* interested in preventing the discrediting of the Democratic Party and the union apparatus than she is in defending public education. In this, she speaks for the upper middle class social layer that stocks academia, the union hierarchies and various pseudo-left organizations that have a taste for mild reforms and find Trump distasteful, but are appalled by the prospects of a revolutionary working class movement for socialism.

In the vein of Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren or the Working Families Party (a Democratic Party faction allied with the union hierarchy), Ravitch seeks to conceal the class character of the nation’s oldest capitalist party and reinforce illusions that it can be

pressured to defend social and democratic rights.

The type of “pressure” they suggest is demonstrated by the May 23 letter by American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten to the membership of the union. She called the Trump-DeVos budget “manifestly cruel to children and catastrophic to public schools” advocating—not strike action or a mass mobilization to defend public education—but a letter writing campaign to DeVos!

Such transparently pathetic appeals to the billionaire who has devoted her life to the destruction of public education will hardly impress teachers. But these developments speak to the recognition by Ravitch, Weingarten and others of rising working class opposition to Trump and DeVos. They feel compelled to work overtime to keep it safely confined within the Democratic Party.

Ravitch concludes her piece with a series of prescriptions for the Democrats: They “should reclaim their mantle as the party of public education,” they “should support strong teachers’ unions,” they “should fight privatization of all kinds,” etc.

This appeal is above all directed towards her readers—teachers and advocates in defense of public education—to not lose faith in the Democrats and the capitalist system this corporate-controlled party defends.

Ravitch represents a very politically conscious element within American politics. She is most famous for her “come to Jesus” moment when as assistant secretary of education under George H.W. Bush, she switched from being an advocate of standardized testing and school choice to an outspoken opponent of high-stakes testing, charters and market-based school reform. Since that time, she has rubbed shoulders with various pseudo-left organizations like the International Socialist Organization, elements within the “BadAss Teachers” and #BlackLivesMatterAtSchool.

She combines this supposed radicalism with the politics she absorbed in her early days in the political and personal orbit of the late teachers’ union president Albert Shanker. A seminal figure, leading the United Federation of Teachers and the AFT each for two decades, Shanker garnered a reputation in the late 1960s for leading wages struggles and serving jail time for illegal strikes. He coupled his limited trade union militancy with extreme right-wing policies, supporting the Vietnam War and conducting anticommunist purges within the union.

Shanker is perhaps most notorious for his role in sabotaging the struggle against mass closures of schools in the wake of the 1975 New York City bankruptcy, even going so far as to offer \$150 million from the Teachers’ Retirement System for investment in city municipal bonds.

Like many other neo-conservatives, Shanker traces his ideological outlook back to ex-Trotskyist Max Shachtman who, in his hatred of the Soviet Union and disillusionment in socialism, became a key adviser of the anticommunist AFL-CIO bureaucracy and the US State Department.

Shanker’s legacy became a prototype for the AFL-CIO and the trade union apparatus. Faced with the end of the post-World War II boom and a historic decline in the world position of American capitalism, the unions by the 1980s would abandon any resistance to the corporate-government onslaught against the working class and convert themselves into direct agencies of the corporations

and banks.

In 1983, Shanker signed onto *A Nation at Risk*, setting the stage for the modern “education reform” movement, and subsequently pioneered the concept of charter schools. It was Albert Shanker who originated the mantra of “reform with us, not against us” to which Randi Weingarten and the AFT now fully subscribe.

This coincided with a sharp shift to the right by the Democratic Party, which would jettison liberalism from its program of liberal anticommunism and join the Republicans in dismantling the social reforms associated with the New Deal of the 1930s and Great Society programs of the 1960s. By the 1990s, the Clintons would join the Republicans in promoting the “school choice” nostrums promoted by free market guru Milton Friedman.

With a photo of herself and Shanker on her home mantle, according to *Education Week*, Ravitch apparently considers the late union leader a friend and close ideological colleague. In her book *Left Back* authored in 2000, Ravitch expresses a viewpoint very close to his neo-conservatism, giving vent to her antipathy for the Soviet Union, the Bolshevik Party and socialism. Today she is tightly aligned with the right-wing trade union bureaucracy of the AFT and, no doubt, the US State Department like her mentor, but under conditions of a far more serious crisis of capitalism.

It is, therefore, no surprise she is a full-throated advocate for the anti-Russia campaign of the Democratic Party attacking Trump from the right. In this, she sides with intelligence agencies and the military in their factional battle for state control and efforts to tilt foreign policy further in the direction of war with Russia.

Ravitch recently writes, “The president’s unwillingness to answer questions about contacts between his campaign team and Russian officials, and the pattern of contradictory and misleading statements on those contacts, are toxic. Never in American history has a president been suspected of collaborating with a hostile foreign power to win an election.”

Ravitch’s continued support for the Democratic Party takes place under an unprecedented social counterrevolution and an escalating frenzy for war. Her allegiance to the party is not politically naïve or tepid, no matter how coyly she wields her pen. It follows inevitably from her anticommunism and ideological support to the pro-capitalist trade unions.

“Don’t like Betsy DeVos? Blame the Democrats” is, despite superficial appearances, aimed at dampening down opposition and providing a lifeline to the crisis-ridden Democratic Party and the capitalist system it represents.

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