

Billionaire Bloomberg and union chief Weingarten join forces to undermine teachers' struggle

By Fred Mazelis and Steve Light
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Readers of *USA Today*, one of the largest-circulation newspapers in the United States, opened a recent issue to see an unusual joint op-ed column from Michael Bloomberg and Randi Weingarten.

Bloomberg, with a net worth of more than \$50 billion, is the seventh-wealthiest individual in the US. He is also the former three-term mayor of New York City. Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), was previously the president of its New York affiliate, the UFT (United Federation of Teachers).

What do this leading representative of the US plutocracy and a woman whose organization claims to represent hundreds of thousands of teachers have in common? Actually, they are far from strangers, as they themselves point out in their column. In 2004, the mayor invited Weingarten to join him for a baseball game in his private box at Yankee Stadium. During this same period, over Bloomberg's first two terms in office, Weingarten was responsible for negotiating the contracts covering 80,000 New York City teachers.

But why have Bloomberg and Weingarten chosen this moment for their essay, and to whom is it addressed? They explain, in part, in their very first paragraph: "Never before has there been so much labor unrest in America's public schools. Teachers, understandably angry about low pay and harmful cuts in education resources, have organized statewide walkouts in West Virginia, Kentucky and Oklahoma. ..."

Though they feign sympathy for the teachers, Bloomberg and Weingarten are in fact alarmed by this development. As their whole column makes clear, they would like to see the militant struggles brought to an end. They are worried that the rank-and-file actions initiated independently of both the AFT and the National Education Association (NEA) may get out of the control of the unions, which have so far—in West Virginia, Oklahoma and most recently Arizona—managed to betray the courageous and determined teachers.

The op-ed piece is addressed, not to teachers or any other section of workers, but to the political representatives of the ruling class, in which Bloomberg in particular occupies a prominent place. The concluding sentence of their very first

paragraph suggests that a few bones must be tossed to the teachers before matters get out of hand. "This time of tension and frustration," they write, "is also a moment of tremendous opportunity—to increase teachers' pay, acknowledge the importance of their work, strengthen accountability, ensure adequate education resources, and, most importantly, achieve the outcomes we need and want for all our kids."

They claim to be advancing the interests of both teachers and students, but what they are jointly advancing is a policy to contain the current struggles. With this goal in mind, they point to New York as a model for educators all over the country. A look at the actual record shows, on the contrary, that teachers in the largest city in the US face the same fundamental issues as those in smaller cities and towns in the states where strikes have already taken place, and everywhere else as well.

Weingarten, both in New York City from 1999 to 2008 and nationally as head of the AFT since then, has helped to promote the testing regime that teachers justifiably detest. This has meant "teaching to the test," developed in New York under Bloomberg and his schools chancellor Joel Klein, and promoted by both George Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and Obama's Race To The Top (RTTP).

Under Bloomberg, more than 160 so-called "failing schools" were closed on the basis of poor test results. The city opened 654 new schools in their place. Roughly half of the city's more than 1,700 schools share a building, and one in the Bronx was split among nine different schools. "Co-location," in which public and charter schools share the same building, continues to be common.

The expansion of charter schools in New York, while not as dramatic as in Detroit, New Orleans and other US cities, robbed the city's public schools of resources and has been used to undermine public education, in line with the aims of the giant hedge fund magnates and their representatives like Eva Moskowitz, the former Democratic city councilmember in New York and currently head of the Success Academy chain of charter schools.

Weingarten and the organization she heads have proclaimed their opposition to charters. This has not prevented them from

establishing their own charter school in New York City, and the union “represents” low-paid and exploited teachers in 20 New York City charters. The UFT received funds from the foundation of another billionaire charter school advocate, Bill Gates, as part of the promotion of Obama’s RTTP. The strategy of the union is to seek to “manage” the expansion of charters in order to defend the dues base and privileges of the union apparatus, rather than opposing these privatization efforts. Allied with the corporate-controlled Democratic Party (Weingarten is a leading member of the Democratic National Committee), the AFT rejects out of hand eliminating the appeal of charters by fighting for a massive infusion of resources into the public schools, from pre-kindergarten through post-secondary education.

The union has sought to trade concessions for a few inadequate pay raises. The 2005 contract, negotiated and pushed through by Weingarten in the face of enormous opposition, extended the teaching day, expanded the school year by moving its start to before Labor Day, and eliminated the citywide transfer of seniority rights while giving principals control over hiring. Higher deductibles and co-pays were imposed in health coverage. The annual wage increases in the 2005 agreement were lower than the official rate of inflation. It was also at this time that the UFT website terminated the message board open to its members.

For the last five years of Bloomberg’s tenure as mayor, the teachers worked without a new contract. The current agreement, announced in the first months of the first term of Mayor Bill de Blasio, thus included a pay scale running over nine years, including retroactive pay. This back pay, long since owed to the teachers, was stretched out over the length of the new agreement, and it came along with a provision mandating the union’s assistance in finding about \$4 billion in “cost savings” in medical care over a four-year period.

Weingarten and Bloomberg point to higher pay and higher graduation rates in New York, but most of their claims are hollow. The starting pay for teachers in the capital of high finance has reached about \$55,000 a year, which does not go very far considering the cost of living, especially the skyrocketing cost of housing. The graduation rate has not translated into meaningful progress in higher education, as reflected in the continuing need for remediation in reading, writing and math on the college level.

As for conditions in New York City schools today, overcrowded classes remain common, with 290,000 students, more than 25 percent of the total, in classes of 30 students or more. Three hundred thousand teaching jobs were lost across the US under Obama, 10,000 of them in New York City. The current total of about 75,000 teachers in the city is still below its previous level of 80,000.

Weingarten and Bloomberg report that they “had plenty of disagreements” during the times they spent across the bargaining table in New York. “Over the years, we debated,

sometimes fiercely, over how best to improve public schools. ... Neither of us ever got as much as we wanted. But by recognizing that New York City public schools would gain from the mayor and the head of the teachers’ union talking, listening and compromising, we made real and sustainable progress for our kids.”

The “disagreements” Bloomberg and Weingarten allude to, including the pace at which to expand the use of charter schools, were purely tactical. The key word in their article is “compromising.” The New York City teachers know how to compromise, they suggest, and this has won them gains. “The same principle applies nationwide,” they write. In other words, teachers must follow the example of New York, where the union so far has been able to keep a lid on discontent.

“Education is fundamentally a local matter,” Bloomberg and Weingarten continue, in one of the most revealing statements of their column. In fact, the opposite is the case. Education is a basic social right that must be guaranteed to all. “Local control” has been the stock-in-trade of right-wing opponents of public education, like the advocates of Jim Crow segregation and religious schools.

Behind Bloomberg and Weingarten’s talk of “local matters” is their fear of a spreading and nationwide movement of rank-and-file teachers. The unions scrambled to keep the teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona separated, and this continues as teachers in Colorado and elsewhere prepare for strike action.

This latest column is another piece of evidence demonstrating the role of today’s teachers’ unions, and that of the entire AFL-CIO. Weingarten boasts of her friendship with the man who is the veritable symbol of the Second Gilded Age, the era of gentrification and record inequality. Her own tenure as UFT president in New York coincided with the real estate and speculative stock market boom that came crashing down in 2008, and from which workers have yet to recover.

Weingarten’s policies are not “mistakes” that can be corrected within the framework of the unions. As her \$500,000 salary attests, she is a union executive whose job is to assist in the administration of the crisis-ridden system of public education that has been starved of resources by both Democrats and Republicans in Washington and in state capitals around the US. Teachers must learn the lesson shown by the alliance of Weingarten and Bloomberg. Only the independent organization of the rank and file in opposition to the pro-capitalist unions, and the fight for a socialist political strategy, can defend public education and the rights of both teachers and students.

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