

BULLETIN OF THE TEACHERS FORUM FOR EMPOWERMENT AND RIGHTS

EDUCATION IS A RIGHT!

ISSUE NO. 21—JANUARY 22, 2003
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JOIN IN! HELP BUILD THE DISCUSSION!

Teachers Forum for Empowerment and Rights organizes educators, parents, youth and students to solve the problems in society. This means fighting for the people to be the decision-makers so as to guarantee the rights of all.

Working out how to empower the people is a key problem to solve, and we have an important role to play in bringing about this new arrangement. A concrete step is to build our group, where we are the decision-makers. Together we acquire the knowledge and consciousness needed to fight for our interests and the interests of society. *Education Is A Right!* is being developed to serve this aim.

Teachers Forum encourages readers to take up this very important work by sending in reports, views and articles, and sharing this bulletin with colleagues and friends.

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War, Education, and the Future of Humanity

The Issue is One of Social Progress

On January 18, 2003, educators including activists from Teachers Forum joined the ranks of an estimated half million Americans standing as one to say *We The People Demand Peace!* Standing together a clear message was sent to the U.S. government and all the world's peoples that U.S. warmongering and attacks on rights is *Not in Our Name!* The growing breadth and depth of the anti-war movement was evident as many youth and students joined in for the first time, along with an increasing number of educators.

In any grouping of people one would likely find a sign demanding, "Fund Schools, Not War!" While funding is increased for the U.S. war machine, deepening cuts are made to education at all levels. Millions of minority and working class youth attend schools whose buildings are not even physically safe, let alone adequately staffed, with modern

equipment, curricula, etc! Educators, parents, students and youth are challenging those in power over their decision to provide billions for a war which cannot be justified, all while the social fabric of the society further degenerates.

The view among the people is not that war on Iraq would be "O.K." if funds were not taken from education, or other social programs. The link between opposition to war with the demand to increase funding for schools reveals that educators are being drawn into the intensifying fight over the direction society is heading in. Which direction will it go and Who Decides? The march on Washington answered loud and clear: We the American people Decide Peace and Progress!

What stands out is that, objectively educators are not only concerned with *their* schools,

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Washington State Day of Action

Tens of Thousands of Teachers, Students and Parents March to Defend the Right to Education

Schools across Washington State shutdown on January 14, as tens of thousands converged for mass rallies to defend the right to education. Actions took place in the capitol Olympia, Spokane and the "Tri-Cities." Spearheaded by teachers and their union, the Washington Education Association (WEA), students, parents and educational staff, concerned citizens, parent-teacher organizations, university and college faculty, schools boards and superintendents joined in.

When the WEA initiated mobilization for the action last spring, momentum rapidly grew in the face of sweeping attacks on education. Once again, like other states nationwide, massive cuts of \$2.4 billion have been announced in the name of "balancing the budget."

The Day of Action opposed any cuts and demanded that funding be increased, including ensuring teachers are compensated commensurate with the vital work they perform. The action also specifically targeted Gover-

nor Gary Locke's suggestion that two education initiatives passed in 2000 by voters be gutted: Initiative 732, which provides cost-

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OUR FUTURE IS NOW! Student Organized Forum on Funding and Education

**Tuesday February 11,
7pm
Monroe Middle School
164 Alexander Street, Rochester**

The Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) and Monroe County School Boards Association (MCSBA) are helping us and co-sponsoring this event. **We ask that you let us know if you can come.** Maria Behncke of AQE at 288-4693 or Judy Wadsworth of MCSBA at 328-1972

A Matter of Conscience

Utah Mandating “Patriotism” in Schools

Legislation mandating that students recite the Pledge of Allegiance has dramatically increased since the events of 9-11. In the 2001-2002 legislative session, legislatures across the U.S. have considered approximately 50 bills dealing with the Pledge in schools, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

A recent example of this trend in 2003 is found in Utah. “Sen. Chris Butters wants all junior high and high school students to say the Pledge of Allegiance each day,” according to the *Salt Lake Tribune*. Revealing the growing willingness among lawmakers to disregard the rule of law, the *Tribune* writes that Butters is willing to push “the constitutional envelope to accomplish patriotic assimilation in the state’s public schools.” Utah public schools are already required to display “In God We Trust,” according to a bill passed last year.

Confusing knowledge with allegiance Butters says: “Kids ought to know what our pledge says... This is America. They ought to know what their government is about. And the pledge tells you what that means definitively, plainly and simply.”

“Let them have at it,” Butters said in response to those who oppose the measure on legal grounds. “It blows me away that someone would be against any American kid having to say the Pledge of Allegiance to his country. That includes ‘under God.’ He can have his own God in his own way as long as he says it.”

Opponents fear that such arguments — quite common among lawmakers — mean the government will not tolerate any deviation from its interpretation of America or its system of government. Given that students could learn the content of the Pledge of Allegiance without being forced to agree with it suggests that the push to “make” students “patriotic” is an effort to silence growing opposition to the direction of government including its war plans.

“Students cannot be forced to salute the flag or recite the pledge,” according Dani Eyer, American Civil Liberties Union

Whose Security? Our Security!

Government Steps Up Spying on Schools and Eases FBI Access to Student Information

According to a new report from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), *Bigger Monster, Weaker Chains: The Growth of an American Surveillance Society*, people’s activities are increasingly being tracked and recorded by the government. “Scarcely a month goes by in which we don’t read about some new high-tech way to invade people’s privacy, from face recognition to implantable microchips, data-mining, DNA chips, and even ‘brain wave fingerprinting’.” The fact is, there are no longer any technical barriers to the Big Brother regime portrayed by George Orwell,” the report states. “From government watch lists to secret wiretaps — Americans are unknowingly becoming targets of government surveillance,” said Dorothy Ehrlich, executive director of the ACLU of Northern California.

In the education sphere, video surveillance will become increasingly common. “A new centralized surveillance center in Washington, DC is an early indicator of what technology may bring. It allows officers to view images from video cameras across the city — public buildings

and streets, neighborhoods, Metro stations, and even schools. With the flip of a switch, officers can zoom in on people from cameras a half mile away,” states the report. This already adds to the metal detectors, cameras and other surveillance equipment imposed on many schools under district and state “zero tolerance” policies.

And consistent with the move to ease police access to personal information, “The federal Department of Education maintains an enormous information bank holding years worth of educational records on individuals stretching from their primary school years through higher education. After September 11, Congress gave the FBI permission to access the database without probable cause,” states the report. This move parallels Section 9528 of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. That provision threatens to withhold government funding to schools if they do not grant military recruiters access to secondary school students names, address, and telephone listings.

of Utah director. “It’s clearly a violation of the First Amendment to require you to say something. Students have the right to remain silently seated if they do not wish to recite the Pledge of Allegiance.”

While some advocate allowing students to opt out of the pledge requirement with a letter from their parents, critics point out that those who decline to participate in something like the Pledge of Allegiance — as with compulsory school prayer forty years ago — are marginalized, singled-out and sometimes even harassed for their beliefs.

In 1940 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a Pennsylvania school district violated the rights of Lillian and William Gobitis when it expelled them from school for not taking part in the flag ritual. In 1943, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that schoolchildren cannot be compelled to salute the flag if doing so conflicts with their religious beliefs. Most recently, a three-judge panel of the 9th

Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco ruled that the Pledge is unconstitutional. The full court is considering whether to revisit the ruling.

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but education generally, on a national and world scale. For education to flourish the foundations for social progress fought for by humanity must be strengthened, not wrecked. The U.S. war drive stands in opposition to international law and all democratic norms. Educators know that no real education can take place when rule of law is eliminated and democratic norms are trampled, as when the right to conscience is attacked through punishing students and teachers for expressing their views. The very concept of mass, public education, education for all on the basis that it is a right, is a reflection of the broad struggle of humanity for social progress. The U.S. “war on terrorism” opposes this progress.

Oakland, California

School District Organizes Anti-war Teach-ins

On January 14, students, teachers, staff, parents and other community members of Oakland, California schools took part in District organized anti-war teach-ins. About 30 Oakland schools — including almost all high schools and several elementary and middle schools in the district — held teach-ins in classrooms and assemblies, news sources report. An estimated 5,000 to 10,000 students participated in the programs.

The teachers' union, the Oakland Education Association (OEA), also helped organize the activities. Some 75 presenters including political activists and area university professors, with groups ranging from Veterans for Peace and the Black Radical Congress to the Middle East Children's Alliance and International ANSWER, gave more than 200 presentations throughout the day to initiate discussion.

The School Board passed a resolution supporting the teach-ins following the initiative of students, teachers and community members in the majority African-American district. The action stood against attacks in the media and from pro-war political groups and "think tanks" like the Heritage Foundation that schools should have no say on the issue of war and peace.

The School Board's resolution states that "an attack on Iraq by the United States would have enormous human, financial and political consequences in the United States and the world community" and "it is essential that the people of the United States be well-informed on the causes and consequences of military action by their government." It calls for citywide public education "concerning the background of the current crisis concerning Iraq, the options available to the United States government for attempting to resolve that crisis, and the likely consequences of a United States military attack on Iraq." Participation in this first teach-in and future events is voluntary.

Dan Siegel, a member of the School Board said, "Our goal is to do education and to have people make up their minds." School officials report that efforts had been made to have speakers presenting in favor of war, including invitations to the State Department and Senator Dianne Feinstein, but none would participate.

Representative of the day's activities, students in one world history class at Oakland High discussed the war with San Francisco State University political philosophy professor Ann Robertson. Students compiled a list of arguments

for and against a war with Iraq on the blackboard, then discussed and interrogated each.

Students firmly rejected the notion that as youth they should have no concern about war, particularly since many of them are going to be asked to do the fighting. They and their teachers instead took up their social responsibility to themselves investigate and decide their stands and actions to take.

Opposing those critics claiming the besieged Oakland School District should instead focus on its "low test scores" and the massive cutbacks about to be inflicted in the name of a \$100 million deficit, Maurice Williams, a student government leader at Oakland High, was quoted as saying: "Here we are in Oakland. We've got some many different problems. We've got a homicide rate that's soaring. We've got a huge hole in our education system. Health care is a mess. And yet we can gather together like this and say that we are concerned about something like this."

In Oakland, school board member Siegel affirmed, "We're off to a good start. This is just the first round." Future initiatives will focus even more on involving the students in participating in rigorous discussion, organizers said.

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of-living increases to teachers and Initiative 728, which calls for funding to reduce class sizes. While Washington State law provides that a majority vote of the Legislature can amend ballot initiatives after two years, those mobilizing for the Day of Action made clear that they represent the will of the people in the state to increase investments in education and the youth now!

The largest of the three convergence points was the State capitol of Olympia, with more than 20,000 taking part, including some 70 buses traveling from Seattle alone. *The Seattle Times* reported:

"It was a show of force that hasn't been seen in Olympia in a decade. Around 9am, teachers from Aberdeen to

Auburn and Bellevue to Bellingham began converging at a staging area at Capitol Lake Park. Across the water, hundreds of buses that carried protestors lined Deschutes Parkway for more than a mile.

"The scene resembled an army amassing. Thousands of teachers and supporters congregated wearing disposable blue parkas that had 'Keep your commitment' stenciled on them."

Across the state, school boards and administrators stood behind the just demands of the teachers, organizing to close the schools and assisting with transportation. On Bainbridge Island, for example, the school board declared "A Day to Support Local Teachers and Public Schools." The community's

contingent to Olympia included more than 500 participants in addition to the teachers. Elsewhere, people distributed flyers, held "coffee hours" in their homes and took other actions to mobilize and plan further actions to defend their schools and the right to education.

In the Issaquah and Snohomish school districts, where teachers have recently waged strike actions in defense of the right to education and a livelihood, officials refused to close schools citing the days missed in connection with the strikes. In Issaquah, where the teachers' struggle was attacked and criminalized, more than 250 retired teachers, parents and others attended actions to represent the teachers and the whole community.

NATIONAL MARCH AGAINST WAR, JANUARY 18, 2003

