

Review

Save Our Schools



Charter schools are being opposed in many areas.

THE COALITION government in Britain has made it clear that it wants 'educational reform' by increasing the number of academies and developing 'free' schools. Many of these ideas derive from the American 'charter school' movement, which has also had some publicity in the UK through the *Waiting for Superman* film. This pamphlet, *Save Our Schools*, written by US teacher and Socialist Alternative (CWI US) member Tom Crean, comes at just the right time.

Paul Gerrard,
Bury NUT

Tom starts with unemployment statistics because: "The US is facing a bleak future of mass structural unemployment... Most job growth will be in low wage, relatively low skill employment sectors... In that context, the goal of the elite is to tailor education to the type of workforce that corporate America will need in the future." This explains the drive to organise schooling around preparation for 'high stakes testing' in literacy and numeracy. Apart from reading and writing, what else will you need?

In 2001, then president George Bush's initiative, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), enshrined 'high stakes testing' as the key tool of federal education policy. Federal funding was conditional on states developing and administering high stakes tests, and determining which schools were 'failing' based on test results. And if a school fails, there'll be a 'charter school' along to replace it.

Tom Crean shows clearly how discontent with poor quality public schools has been exploited by the US ruling class to close schools and replace them with charter schools: privately run, linked to the big corporate players like Walmart, profit-making, and no-union zones.

Of course it hasn't worked. One of NCLB's most ardent supporters at the time, educationist Diana Ravitch, has acknowledged in a recent book that: "the evidence says NCLB was a failure and that charter schools aren't going to be any better." Yet president Obama persists in these reactionary policies, leading many teachers to question why their unions support the Democrat Party.

The stakes are certainly high for US teachers - US schools get closed down if test scores are not high enough. In February 2010, the school board in Central Falls, Rhode Island, voted to fire all 93 staff at the city's only high school because it was allegedly 'failing'. Increasingly, teacher contracts are offered in two forms: either more money, sign away 'tenure' (job security) and accept merit pay based on test scores, or stay on the old contract.

The American teacher unions,

the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have been slow to react. Randy Weingarten, president of AFT, was, incredibly, an advocate for these reforms and signed several sell-out contracts. But Crean is quick to point out the increasing effectiveness of rank-and-file activists, often campaigning in alliance with working class parents.

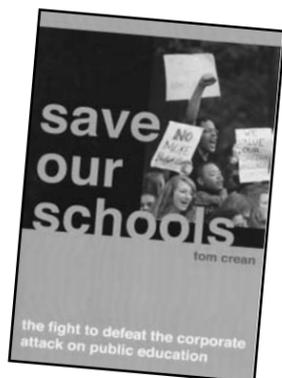
In June 2010 the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) won the leadership elections of the Chicago Teachers Union for a militant, fightback policy and real union democracy; Florida teachers, with parent and community support, fought off a bill to abolish tenure; and in both Chicago and New York, the GEM (Grassroots Education Movement) has delayed or reduced the impact of school closures.

The pamphlet ends with a socialist programme for education, which would be a really useful basis for discussion in a Socialist Party or Youth Fight for Jobs meeting.

Reading this excellent pamphlet made me feel that "I've seen the future, and it doesn't work". It is all on its way across the Atlantic - for 'Teach for America', read 'Teach First'; for 'high stakes testing', read SATs; for charter schools, read academies (not profit-making just yet, but Gove has no objection in principle). That's the international, neoliberal agenda, and we all have the same fight on our hands.

Since September 2010, 204 UK schools have become academies but this is still a tiny proportion of the UK's 22,000 schools and the coalition government is way behind on its targets. Teachers as far apart as Lancashire and London have struck against academy proposals. SATs and league tables have had several holes blown in them. Crean's message that unions can be reclaimed, and alliances with parents forged, is a good one with which to start 2011.

• *Save Our Schools* can be ordered for £2 (including p+p) from Socialist Books, PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD (cheques payable to Socialist Books). It is also available online at: www.socialistalternative.org/publications/education/

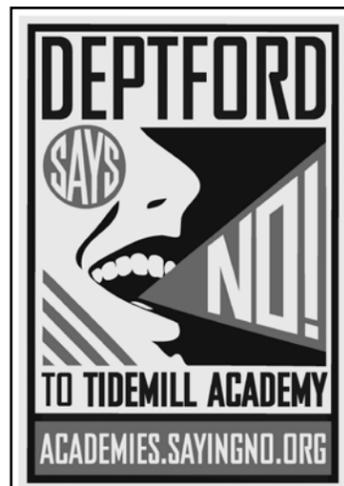


Tidemill school - victory for parents

ONE OF the flagship academies planned was Tidemill Primary School in Deptford in south London. Head master Mark Elms, who achieved widespread media attention when he became Britain's highest-paid 'superhead', has been trying to turn Tidemill into an academy.

But on 18 January, the school governors withdrew their application for academy status, despite voting to go ahead by eight votes to five only the previous month. Parents, teachers and local residents led by Leila Galloway, the mother of two Tidemill pupils, have been running a campaign against these plans (see *The Socialist* 642).

Campaigners opposed academy status for many reasons. The campaign's solicitors reported that the school failed to comply with its public sector equality duties - the need to promote race, gender and disability equality and tackle discrimination. They had also decided on a misunderstanding as to the basis on which



parental views had been obtained.

Their hard work has unearthed that, apart from the flaws in the basic arguments for academies, there were serious flaws and miscalculations in their figures. Elms and the pro-academy faction seem to have

been most worried by the solicitors' allegations that they "considered misleading and/or incorrect financial information."

For example, the school estimated that it would cost them £60,000 to pay for additional services previously provided by the local education authority (Lewisham council). The Department for Education estimates the cost at £78,000 while Lewisham estimates the figure to be over £229,000.

So the governors at Tidemill, probably fearing being subjected to a judicial review, withdrew their application.

Leila Galloway believes Elms may well try to present the application again at some stage. But along with local campaigners, she sees Tidemill governors' withdrawal as a victory for parents and local residents. The Deptford Says No campaign will keep fighting to stop this planned academy.

• More information on: academies.sayingno.org

Bankers' "Free school" excludes poorer pupils



Workers can see how academies undermine education.

photo Senan

No to academies!

- No to privatisation of education.
- For fully comprehensive education, to be controlled by elected local authorities, parents, pupils and the wider working class.
- For a joint campaign of parents, pupils and staff to oppose academies and all attacks on education.
- For a public sector strike against all cuts in jobs and services.

A PROPOSED 'FREE school'/academy in Wandsworth, south London, run by 25 bankers working for top City firms, has displayed blatant class discrimination by excluding children from poorer neighbourhoods.

Bolingbroke Academy is due to be built on a former hospital site. Leading City firms such as Rothschild, Credit Suisse, CitiGroup, Barclays Capital, Coutts, Normura, HSBC, Morgan Stanley and RBS are using Con-Dem education minister Michael Gove's flagship academies policy to create an elite school.

This academy's sponsors have decided to use feeder schools for its intake. These schools will be in some of the most well-heeled areas of Battersea. But one nearer school, based around a council estate and with wage levels about half those in the feeder schools, is excluded.

At a time when huge education cuts are threatened, the academy could suck resources away from the rest of the education authority, Tory-controlled Wandsworth.

For a start, buying the hospital site will cost the council £13 million with more public cash being

spent on its conversion to a school and £6 million yearly for running the academy. All this just to pass a school over to bankers - as if bank bosses haven't gained enough in recent years!

So far, Gove's Department for Education has approved many such projects. But as Martin Powell-Davies, NUT National Executive member for Inner London, recently commented on the government's academy proposals: "most schools quite rightly refuse the offer."

"Any financial advantage that new academies might make from the move would come at the expense of the central local authority budget, reducing their ability to support other schools and families. Governors are being bribed by the government to try to break-up comprehensive local authority schooling.

"Chains of unaccountable education businesses will end up replacing elected local authorities - which is what the government intends."

This barefaced bias is typical of what will be seen if the Con-Dems get their way. Teachers and parents must fight these plans.