

Gender, Race, Immigration, Prisons, and the Economy

DEMOCRATIC LEFT

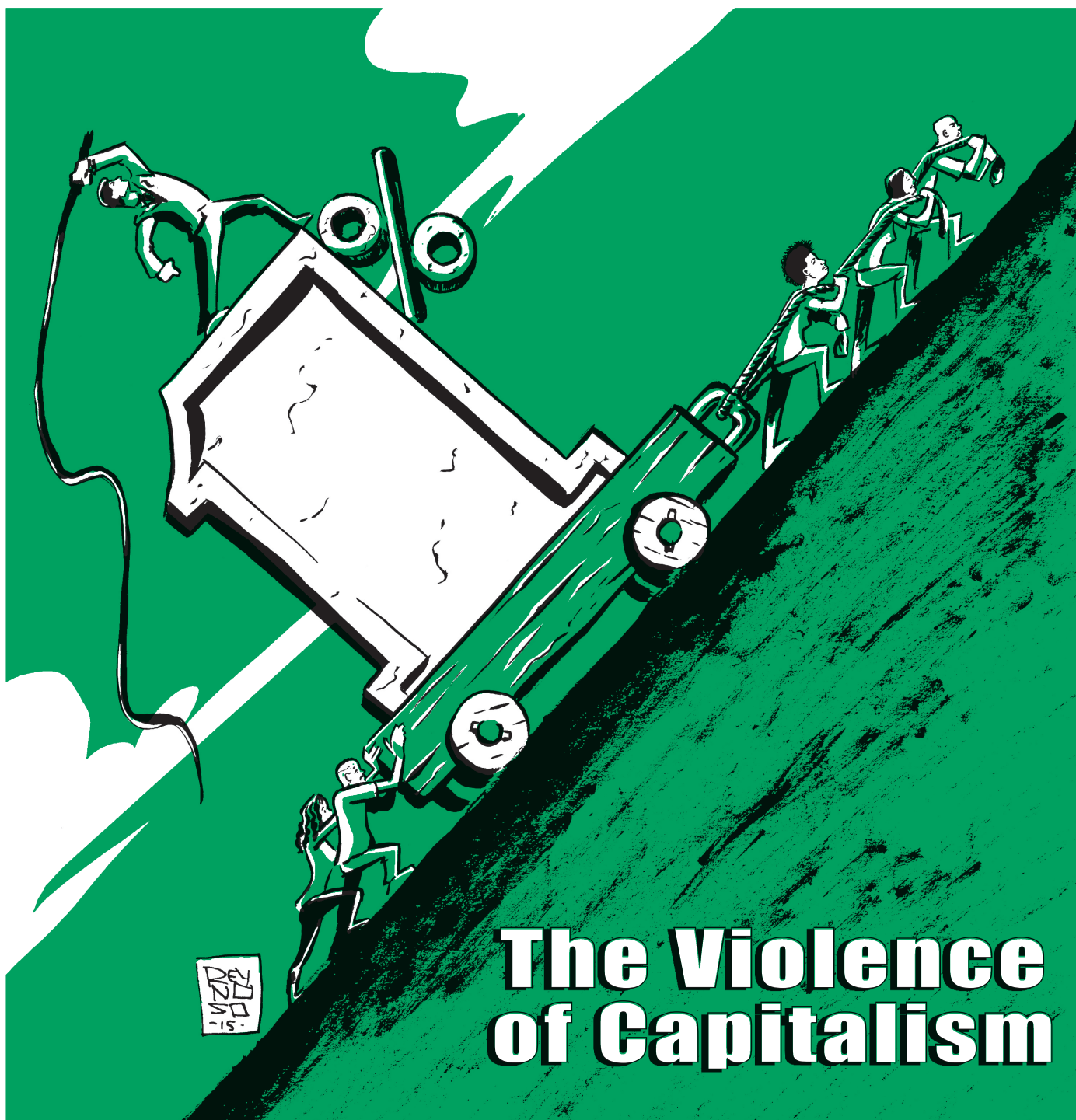
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Subverting Big Money's Attack on Public Education

By Deborah Meier

Sixty years ago, I was active in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) as well as the democratic socialist movement, and I subbed in Chicago public K-8 schools two days a week. Spending those days in the schools raised some doubts in my mind about both the civil rights and socialist agenda. It was clear that the average urban student was being trained to be “dumb,” thoughtless (in the literal sense) and accepting of what couldn't be changed. Could we achieve the kind of democracy we dreamed of with such a “dumbed down” public?

Teaching kindergarten restored my faith. Working in a mostly all-black school was the most exciting experience of my life—intellectually, socially, and emotionally. The kids *did* have fine vocabularies, were constantly making sense of the world, had profound questions, and were quick learners when engaged. They weren't “dumb,” but they had good reason to follow their parents' advice to be obedient and keep quiet in school. With the impetus of the civil rights movement and movements for school change, though, it seemed as if schools could encourage that liveliness of heart and mind and tenacious imagination that I witnessed during the next decade.

Teaching became my lifelong occupation, and along the way I found parents and teachers who became colleagues in subverting the boredom that we inflicted on active young children for six hours a day. At the same time, I became an expert on the design of standardized tests and discovered that these tests were amazingly sensitive to what differentiated the “culture” and language of those on the margins of society from those in the center. Somehow, those on the margins always gave the “wrong” answers. It turned out, though, that the “wrong” answers were often right if your context was different, and for a while, it seemed as if the inherent unfairness of standardized tests could be rectified.

By the late eighties, I was part of a political educational network called the Coalition of Essential

Schools that included a thousand other schools that offered elite-style education (that is, critical thinking) to the non-elites. The tests that so injured low-income and minority children were crumbling under academic attacks on their reliability and validity. Despite the increasingly conservative/reactionary politics around us, I thought we were going to win.

Foolish me. While I wasn't paying attention, another “movement” of wealthy and powerful people and foundations had plotted out a different path and had done so in the name of civil rights, of “no child left behind.” They didn't plan to change the schools that middle-class children attended, which for the most part are working just fine.

Instead, they set out to dehumanize the schools of the poor so that they could be operated more cheaply, contain children for a longer time, pacify the parents, and make a profit. At the same time, not surprisingly, they could destroy teacher unions. School vouchers, which would have opened the way for many for-profit schools, had been the opening salvo in the war against public schools, but when they were defeated, their supporters developed a new agenda.

They wanted data to prove that public schools weren't working, and if you ignored the fact that test scores correlated almost perfectly with family income and that public education is funded by property taxes so that richer districts have more money, test data surely did. There were enormous gaps between the scores of schools in poor districts and schools in middle-class and upper-middle-class districts.

The answer would be charter schools, and many erstwhile allies would be taken in by the promise. The language was compatible with what we had been doing: small schools, parental choice, self-government. But the reality was different, as legislation opened the door to private entrepreneurs and

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Young Democratic Socialist youth gathered in New York City for the annual winter conference February 13-15, 2015. Photo: Kayla Pace

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chain-store schools that are the educational equivalents of Walmart. Controlled by private boards, they are paid for by taxpayer funds.

Although they represent about 6% of all public schools, charters affect a much larger percent of the schools that house the poor, who now make up 51% of all students in public schools in the country. In the District of Columbia, for instance, 39% of public school students attend charter schools. These schools promote a kind of education aimed to appeal to desperate parents, not to those who have real choices. They're called "no excuses" schools and remind me of the Chicago schools of 1962. In fact, Chicago schools are well on their way to being privatized and returned to the rote education of the fifties and early sixties, for they were then and are now intended for low-income minority children. Buoyed by the disaster of Hurricane Katrina, corporate reformers took over the New Orleans schools and have turned them into an all-charter system. Meanwhile neighborhood schools in the most vulnerable communities are closed and their teachers, disproportionately teachers of color, are let go, while parents scramble for other safe or even semi-safe havens.

It's a crisis, and it won't be won by teacher revolts or even by coalitions of teachers and parents. What our schools need is a renewed civil rights

movement and a Democratic Party not beholden to the vast money-making machine on which so many politicians in both parties depend. Meanwhile, one hopes to slow it down.

There are signs of new energy on the left. While some bemoan Occupy's "failure," in fact it introduced a radical concept into our everyday language—the talk of 99% vs. 1%. That's a big step in consciousness raising. And then, although black men and women have been subjected to police violence for a century, we witnessed a groundswell of reaction to the events in Ferguson, Missouri, and Staten Island, New York. On a similar scale there is a growing backlash against the testing regime in many unexpected places—led by "ordinary" parents.

Schools alone cannot fight the forces of big money, but they demand our attention and our activism if democracy is to survive. ❖

Deborah Meier has been a member of various socialist movements—SYL, ISL, DSOC, and DSA to name a few—and has been active for the last 50 years in public education as a teacher, parent, and activist.

