

# Buffalo Forum



Local Publication of the  
U.S. Marxist-Leninist Organization

Workers of all countries, unite!

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April 22, 2016

Vol. 20 #4

## Clinton, Trump and the Danger of War

The government establishment and monopoly media have worked hard to present Donald Trump as by far the most dangerous candidate. He is the one promoted as a racist, as calling for violence at rallies, as unfit to be commander in chief, and so forth. He is the one that advocates morally reprehensible positions, like banning all Muslims. Leading Republicans like Romney and McCain along with more than 100 “national security leaders” have openly said they would not support a Trump candidacy. George W. Bush’s former NSA and CIA director retired Air Force General Michael Hayden has said the military would not follow Trump’s orders. All of which supports the conclusion that he is the most dangerous candidate. Indeed,

**Clinton, Trump and Danger of War • 8**

## EARTH DAY 2016

## Organize to Humanize the Natural and Social Environment

*Buffalo Forum* greets the many people here in New York and worldwide standing up to defend Mother Earth. Organizing here continues on many fronts, including fracking, where a statewide ban has been secured. Efforts continue now to ban fracking everywhere. Organizers are also

blocking monopoly plans to use New York as a pipeline “highway” to send fracked gas from Pennsylvania to the eastern seaboard. Very recently, determined struggles blocked the Constitution pipeline (see p. 3). And various battles, at

**Earth Day 2016 • 3**

## Undemocratic Primaries Show Necessity to Modernize Elections

The primary spectacle continues to show the current set up as undemocratic and outdated. The New York primary again saw Clinton and Trump win, and again revealed the undemocratic character of the set up. New York, like many states, has a closed primary. This means you must be registered as a Democrat to vote in the

Democratic primary, or as a Republican for the Republic primary. Those registered as independents, or Greens, or other parties, cannot vote in the primary. For New York this is about three million people, or about 27 percent of registered voters. Upcoming primaries in Pennsylvania, also a large

**Modernize Elections • 7**

## CONTINUE OUTREACH TO PARENTS

## Firm Stand Against State Testing Needs to be Used Against Receivership

Persistent organizing efforts by parents and teachers together brought about increased test refusals in Buffalo. School #43, for example, had 72% refusals, up from about 50%. This occurred despite repeated efforts by the district, including after testing started, to get parents to “opt in.” Parents and teachers, including the school’s Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) had organized to get informed and discussed the issues, reaching the conclusion that the tests were harmful to their children and education. They stuck

to their conclusion, reflecting a stand that says it is parents, students and teachers that decide, not the state.

School #53 also saw a large increase in refusals among seventh and eighth graders. It is another school where parents organized and had a chance to be fully informed about the tests, their role, how they are serving to restrict curriculum, and so forth. A large number of eighth graders at MLK refused, as did many at other schools. While the district

**Continue Outreach to Parents • 9**



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## **UPCOMING EVENT**

IN EDT

MONDAY

4 PM

2 MAY

**#JUSTICEFORINDIACUMMINGS**

- **WAS TAKEN TO POLICE CUSTODY IN THE ERIE COUNTY HOLDING CENTER ON FEBRUARY 1**
- **WHEN HER FAMILY ASKED THE POLICE TO TRANSPORT HER TO A NEARBY HOSPITAL, THEIR REQUEST WAS DENIED**
- **TWO WEEKS LATER, INDIA HAD BEEN EXAMINED FOR POSSIBLE BROKEN ARM AND RIBS BY THE ERIE COUNTY HOLDING CENTER**
- **SHE HAD LIKELY NOT RECEIVED NOURISHMENT FOR DAYS**
- **INDIA CUMMINGS PASSED AWAY ON FEBRUARY 21**

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# Constitution Pipeline Stopped by Anti-Fracking Movement

*Earthjustice, April 22, 2016*

In a win for climate activists and the anti-fracking movement, and a blow to fossil fuel polluters and the federal regulatory agencies that enable them, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) denied a key permit to companies seeking to build a 124-mile fracked gas pipeline.

The Constitution Pipeline Project — a joint venture between four oil and gas companies — was proposed to transport fracked natural gas from Susquehanna County in Pennsylvania through Broome, Chenango, Delaware and Schoharie counties in New York to existing interstate

pipelines. The pipeline route would have crossed hundreds of streams and wetlands, including those supplying drinking water to families along the proposed route. Using the power granted under the *Clean Water Act*, DEC officials rejected the companies' permit application, citing damage the project would do to water supplies along the pipeline route... [Resistance has included numerous demonstrations, legal action and more than 15,000 public comments to the DEC opposing the pipeline].

The nonprofit environmental law organization Earthjustice has been staunchly opposed to the project and represented a

coalition of groups — Catskill Mountainkeeper, Riverkeeper, Clean Air Council, Delaware-Otsego Audubon Society, Delaware Riverkeeper Network, and the Pennsylvania and Atlantic chapters of Sierra Club — in pipeline approval proceedings before the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC.)

Last month FERC gave the go-ahead to pipeline developers to clear-cut 20 miles of trees along the pipeline's planned route through Pennsylvania. Pointing to the fact that New York State had not yet issued a permit, Earthjustice and other en-

**Constitution Pipeline • 4**

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## I • EARTH DAY 2016

Seneca Lake and elsewhere, are directed at blocking all fracking infrastructure and transportation of fracked gas and oil in New York.

A statewide rally is planned for May 14 in Albany, demanding *No Bomb Trains, No Fracked Gas Or Oil Infrastructure, No More Pollution*. As organizers bring out:

"New York, and Albany in particular, has become a major hub for crude oil coming to the east coast from the Bakken shale fields of North Dakota. That oil has been rolling through New York on trains. One corporation, Global Partners, operates a terminal, which offloads crude oil onto barges to be shipped to refineries to the south. The terminal is situated in the Port of Albany, immediately behind Ezra Prentice Homes, a low-income housing development. Explosive bomb trains pass just feet from the playground and the back of an apartment building. Oil cars are parked behind the apartments off-gassing toxic fumes which waft through the neighborhood. Global Partners is currently being sued for violating its air pollution permit.

"From every end of the state, these trains are rolling through densely populated neighborhoods and cities. Oil trains come south from Canada along the shores of Lake Champlain. Trains come along the Mohawk Valley, through Buffalo and



Rochester. Much of the oil train traffic passes through CSX's Selkirk yard, where there was an oil train derailment in February 2014, and south along the banks of the Hudson River to refineries in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware.

"So this is where we plan to take our stand, to protect those most in harms way, and to say we must keep these fossil fuels in the ground for a just and livable future," (see <http://www.albany2016.org> for more).

### **Control of Decision Making Needed**

As people here and worldwide advance their fight against fracking, offshore

drilling and many other battles to defend and protect Mother Earth, they are contending with the reality that we, the people, do not control the decisions being made. We do not decide what to produce, how to produce it, and what use to make of the wealth *we* working people produce. Instead, the giant energy and military monopolies, like Exxon and Halliburton, impose their monopoly right against public right and against Mother Earth.

The drive of U.S. rulers for profit and world empire is causing disasters and chaos, here and worldwide. Indeed, the U.S. war machine is the single largest polluter worldwide and responsible in large part for current wars, for the refugee crisis, for fracking, including increased demands to do so on public lands, for yet more offshore drilling, for blocking alternative energy sources. Stopping this war machine and fighting for an anti-war government is integral to protecting the human and natural environment.

Control, especially by working people, over the decisions that impact everyone's lives is necessary to protect Mother Earth and human beings. The two are intertwined. Advancing democracy, so as to empower the people to be decision makers, is necessary to humanize the social and natural environment. Let us together advance this fight!

**12 ARRESTED IN EARTH DAY ACTION**

# Protest Targets Gas Storage in Seneca Lake's Salt Caverns

Sandra Steingraber

Five feet in diameter and swirling with clouds, a blue and green replica of Planet Earth helped a dozen human inhabitants block three trucks April 21 at the main entrance of Crestwood Midstream. The Earth Day-themed civil disobedience action was part of an ongoing campaign against proposed gas storage in Seneca Lake's abandoned salt caverns.

Organized by the direct action group, We Are Seneca Lake, the protesters, with their Earth replica aloft, formed a blockade on the driveway of the Houston-based gas storage and transportation company shortly after sunrise at 6:45 a.m.

The group held banners that read, *We All Are on This Earth Together* and *Happy Earth Day! Decarbonize Now*. While blockading, they read aloud together from a new report released this week by the World Resources Institute, which documents alarming new scientific findings about the ongoing climate crisis. Among them: 2015 was the warmest year on record, and the first three months of 2016 each far surpassed the warmest average temperature ever recorded for those months. [...]

The protesters were all charged with disorderly conduct and arrested at about 7:30 a.m. by Schuyler County deputies and transported to the Schuyler County Sheriff's department, where they were ticketed and released.

Among the 12 arrested was a member of the We Are Seneca Lake media team,

Michael Dineen. At the time of his arrest, Dineen, who was not part of the blockade, was photographing the protest from across Highway 14. Dineen was also charged with disorderly conduct.

The total number of arrests in the 18-month-old civil disobedience campaign now stands at 549.

"We will not stop blocking the gates of Crestwood until the expansion is canceled," said Nathan Lewis of Hector in Schuyler County who was arrested today. "We will not sit idle as our community is threatened. There is more than one way to vote. We vote with our body and soul when we resist the fossil fuel industry."

Crestwood's methane gas storage expansion project was approved by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission in October 2014 in the face of broad public opposition and unresolved questions about geological instabilities, fault lines, and possible salinization of Seneca Lake, which serves as a source of drinking water for 100,000 people.

Crestwood also seeks to store two other products of fracking in Seneca



Lake salt caverns — propane and butane (so-called Liquefied Petroleum Gases, LPG) — for which it is awaiting a decision by Governor Cuomo's Department of Environmental Conservation.

"It has been six years since the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico; six months since the failure of the methane storage in Aliso Canyon; and over six days since TransCanada's 16,800 gallon dilbit leak into South Dakota farmland," said Debb Guard of Schenectady in Schenectady County who was arrested today. "Earth Day is a time to remind people that water, air and land are still at risk of contamination by the oil and gas industry. Earth Day is also a time to embrace renewable energy sources: solar, wind and geothermal."

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### 3 • CONSTITUTION PIPELINE STOPPED

Environmental groups called FERC's move premature and illegal. New York's rejection of the project today bolsters support for criticism of FERC as an agency that rubber stamps fossil fuel infrastructure projects. [...]

Earthjustice attorney Moneen Nasmith said, "The 124-mile Constitution pipeline, planned to run through five counties and two states, and hundreds of waterways is

the sort of massive fossil fuel investment that would have locked our region into continued extraction and burning of fossil fuels and irreparably damaged precious water resources at a time when we need instead to be protecting these resources and speeding the transition to 100 percent renewable energy for all...The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission which is failing to do its job and evaluate the

environmental and climate impacts of the massive fossil fuel infrastructure projects it approves. FERC is an outlier agency that, with every day, is exposed as being drastically out of step with its peers. It is time for fossil fuel industry enablers and apologists to step aside and let the rest of us continue the work necessary to solve the climate crisis and transition our society to 100 percent renewable energy."



## Forty Percent of US Electricity Could Come From Rooftop Solar

S.E. Smith, Care2

With rooftop solar arrays becoming more common, the Department of Energy (DOE) decided to do some exploring to quantify exactly how much energy Americans could generate if they installed photovoltaic systems efficiently and extensively.

What they found was startling: The country could meet 39 percent of its energy needs through rooftop photovoltaics, and, surprisingly, small structures like private homes are likely to return the best results.

In a country still struggling for energy independence and looking for ways to reduce its carbon footprint, this is big news. The next step is to make it happen.

Researchers at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory took a look at data from 128 cities — accounting for almost a quarter of the buildings in the U.S. — and evaluated them for solar potential with the use of tools like light detection and ranging (LiDAR) to determine their energy potential.

They found that solar arrays could generate 1,432 terawatt hours of electricity annually if systems were installed correctly and efficiently. [...]

Solar energy is growing increasingly popular, and it is definitely not an alternative energy outlier anymore. The government is heavily invested in making it more accessible through measures like the Rooftop Solar Challenge, a push to address affordability and other barriers to installation.

In addition to addressing affordability with investments and incentives, the government also helps with permitting and zoning, utility policies and other issues that can intersect with making rooftop solar accessible. They're rolling out the program in major cities where it will have the most immediate impact, but the lessons learned will be valuable for small communities as well.

**Solar Energy • 12**

## Use Niagara Falls Air Base for Solar Array

*(The proposal below was developed by Charlie Bowman and the Western New York Peace Center, as a stand against war and for the environment. Supporting documentation is available at: [www.WNYPeace.org](http://www.WNYPeace.org))*

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New jobs are needed in Niagara Falls and we should begin thinking outside the military box about how to do that: the jobs need to be good paying, long lasting and the Buffalo-Niagara region needs to do its part in reducing the need to burn fossil fuels for electricity.

Towards these ends, the Western New York Peace Center proposes the construction of two gigantic solar arrays: one at the Niagara Falls Air Base and the other on top of the Lewiston Pump Storage Reservoir. The combined output of both arrays could power 195,000 homes in Western New York and increase the clean energy output of Niagara Falls by 50 percent, and increase the current U.S. solar electrical generating capacity by 34 percent.

Both utility-sized arrays would need maintenance and that employment ranges between 220 and 1,000 — well paying (average \$60,000), never-going-away jobs. On-site construction jobs lasting several years total 6,180. Annual income from both arrays would range between \$574 - \$656 million, dwarfing current Pentagon expenditures — \$170 million — at the Niagara Falls Air Base

The combined estimated cost to build both arrays is \$4.62 billion. Where could the money come from?

The choices are federal, state, private, and foreign, or some combination of the four:

1) If we could stop the war spending in Afghanistan for 15 days...

2) The federal government could borrow the money and pay \$208 million in interest annually, just a tad more than current

Pentagon expenditures (i.e., total economic impact) at the base. In effect, the money now being spent to support military operations at Niagara Falls Air Base could pay the interest on borrowed \$4.62 billion to build the solar arrays.

3) New York State (NYS) could temporarily cease returning the stock transfer tax to Wall Street firms. Our state collects this tax when shares of stock are sold and bought on Wall Street. In 2011 the state collected and returned in its entirety \$13.8 billion to Wall Street. If NYS retained 88 trading-days worth, construction of both solar arrays could be funded without borrowing a dime. Alternatively, the state could pay the annual interest on borrowed \$4.62 billion by keeping 4 days worth of the stock transfer tax every year.

4) We need to encourage private investment in renewable energy and the well-tested vehicle for that is a feed-in tariff (FIT). Governor Cuomo could make FIT law by the stroke of his pen unleashing private money for both solar arrays. Investors would be guaranteed an excellent return, about 7 percent profit. The extra electricity costs to NY State households would be about 1 Dunkin Donut per week, or 1/3 of a pack of cigarettes per month.

And finally, the fine folks at NFAS who lose their jobs as a result of the inevitable Pentagon cutbacks should be given first preference for construction and long-term jobs at both solar arrays.



## 6 Years After Gulf Oil Spill, Residents Demand 'No More Drilling'

Antonia Juhasz, *Rolling Stone*, April 20, 2016

As the legal cases against British Petroleum (BP) draw to a close, the risks of offshore oil drilling — and public opposition to it — grow

Six years ago, one of the worst environmental disasters in U.S. history occurred in the Gulf of Mexico. The BP oil spill had a profound impact on the area, and today residents demand an end to continued deepwater oil drilling.

On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, weeks before the sixth anniversary of the BP oil spill, hundreds of protesters march into the New Orleans Superdome carrying banners reading *Keep It In the Ground, No More Drilling* and *No New Leases*. Hurricane Katrina made the Superdome an icon of climate destruction and government ineptitude, but on this day, the Interior Department made it the location of a federal auction for 45 million acres in the offshore Gulf of Mexico for new oil and gas drilling.

Less than two weeks later, Louisiana Federal District Judge Carl Barbier accepted a final settlement agreement between BP, the federal government, five states and hundreds of local governments, bringing to an end the feds' six-year case against BP and most major outstanding legal cases against the company stemming from the April 20, 2010, Macondo well blowout and the worst offshore drilling oil spill in history.

At \$20 billion, it is the largest environmental settlement in U.S. history, and the largest civil settlement with a single entity ever. Nonetheless, BP got off cheaply with the deal, while decisions made as part of the legal process made offshore oil drilling more dangerous.

The final criminal case against BP and Halliburton employees stemming from the disaster was also heard this month. Federal prosecutors originally sought criminal charges, including manslaughter. In the end, all they achieved were acquittals or plea bargains for lesser offenses that resulted in no prison time for any of the five men charged (the most senior among them a BP vice president), with the final case ending in a misdemeanor charge and probation.



Industry and government have learned crucial lessons from the blowout at BP's Macondo well, the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon rig, the deaths of 11 men and the release of millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf. Few of those lessons, however, have been acted upon. Instead, it is "business as usual" in offshore drilling, argues David Pritchard, a petroleum engineer who consults for major oil companies, including BP, Mobil, Chevron and Halliburton.

### Obama Expands Offshore Drilling

President Obama is expanding offshore oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, maintaining drilling in the Pacific and, as part of a newly proposed five-year plan (open to public comment until May 2nd), planning new drilling in the Arctic and even more in the Gulf. In response to overwhelming public opposition, however, the administration shelved a plan to drill in the Atlantic.

The Department of the Interior has sought to improve offshore drilling safety over the last six years, including over 500 pages of new rules released just last week. Experts warn, however, that these efforts remain woefully insufficient, particularly as companies move to even riskier deeper depths, with 86 percent of new oil production in the Gulf taking place 1,000 to nearly 5,000 feet deeper than BP was drilling the Macondo,

including two projects at depths nearly twice as great.

"Are the new guidelines enough to prevent another Macondo disaster?" asks Robert Bea, an oil-industry veteran of 60 years and head of the Deepwater Horizon Study Group at the Center for Catastrophic Risk Management, which contributed analysis to the National Oil Spill Commission. "No! They did not address the key factors at its roots."

In its final and most damning report on the BP disaster, the U.S. Chemical Safety Board, or CSB, an independent federal agency that investigates industrial accidents, warned last week, "Offshore regulatory changes made thus far... do not do enough to prevent another disaster like the Deepwater Horizon rig explosion and oil spill at the Macondo well in the Gulf of Mexico.... [A] culture of minimal regulatory compliance continues to exist in the Gulf of Mexico and risk reduction continues to prove elusive."

CSB investigator Mary Beth Mulcahy said that the new regulations, released the day after the CSB report, are a positive change, but more is needed, most critically on enforcement. Companies are not being required to "put into practice what they put on paper," she explains. "BP and Transocean had many corporate policies in place before Macondo that would have satisfied these new regulations," but nobody was "checking to see if they

**Residents Demand No More Drilling • 7**



**I • MODERNIZE ELECTIONS**

state with 210 Democratic delegates/71 Republican, and Maryland (118D/38R), Delaware, Connecticut are also all closed, as is California's (546D/172R).

Primaries, as a main method for elections, were developed in part to block demands by the people for greater democracy, inside the parties and out. The two parties, however, wanted to ensure their control, despite votes. Hence the complicated rules and use of delegates. And, as party officials repeat, in the end, it is the parties who decide the candidate, not the voters.

If voters are actually to select the candidates, the current system needs to be modernized, beginning by eliminating use of delegates and use of voter registration based on party affiliation. There should be a single, national, elections commission

responsible for establishing voter roles based solely on the qualifications needed, which are to be a citizen, 18 years or older. This is how it is done in most other countries, with the government taking responsibility for ensuring all eligible voters are registered. The U.S. has the opposite practice, of requiring voters to register, as part of its long history of blocking voters, like African Americans, from participating in governance. It requires party affiliation mainly so the parties can claim to have millions of members, when in fact they do not.

Additionally, for voters to select candidates, instead of hundreds of millions, even billions being raised by and for candidates, there should be public funding of the election process, not the candidates. And

the process should be one characterized by informing the public, with candidates and parties presenting their solutions to the agenda set by the public. That way, urgent issues like war and peace could not be ignored, as is currently occurring. Solutions to problems of the environment, poverty, inequality, would need to be addressed. Equal media time for all is required. On this basis, worker politicians from among the ranks of the people could be selected and win election.

These are initial steps toward a more modern democratic process, ones that can readily be accomplished. The strong anti-establishment sentiment currently being expressed can best be utilized by organizing today for such a modern, democratic process.

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**6 • RESIDENTS DEMAND NO MORE DRILLING**

were doing what they said they would do" — or, some would add, if they were even capable of doing so.

Nonetheless, Exxon Mobil has already argued that the new regulations are prohibitively expensive. "Many in our industry view regulations as simply unneeded paperwork," Pritchard, the petroleum engineer, says, also warning that industry technology is not keeping pace with operations.

As the risks grow, so too do insight into the ongoing environmental harms to the Gulf. The final environmental damage assessment prepared by scores of scientists, four federal and more than a dozen state agencies was released in February detailing millions of wildlife deaths and widespread ecosystem destruction. Its release makes available scientific studies previously kept from public view, including a report attributing a sharp rise in stillborn and infant deaths of bottlenose dolphins to the spill. Recovery of some dolphin populations could take more than 50 years, while some 30 million gallons of BP oil that remain in Gulf waters may bring new harms for thousands of years to come.

For BP, the final financial tally is around \$55 billion, an amount below the

predictions of analysts at Moody's rating agency, who in 2011 estimated a total cost to BP of \$60 billion. BP called the costs "manageable." BP remains a leading offshore operator around the world, including in the Gulf of Mexico, bidding on \$18 million worth of new leases on March 23 at the Superdome.

Nonetheless, BP suffered a massive 91 percent decline in profits in the fourth quarter of 2015 and has laid off thousands of workers. BP's recent losses have more to do with the collapse of oil prices than fallout from the Gulf oil spill, though both events have a similar origin: oil companies seeking — and governments allowing — drilling to occur virtually unabated everywhere. The companies are reaping what they have sown: oversupply and unmitigated risk.

The American public has taken notice, with support for offshore drilling falling from 68 percent before the BP disaster to 52 percent today. Even more striking, nearly 75 percent of Americans polled now prefer alternative energy to gas and oil production as the solution to the nation's energy problems, the highest percentage since at least 2011....

**Opposition to Offshore Drilling Grows**

Which brings us to perhaps the greatest change in the last six years: opposition to offshore oil drilling in the Gulf.

Among the protesters who swarmed the Superdome in March was 22-year-old Howard Johnson, who took the bus from Gulfport, Mississippi. Howard had never imagined participating in such an event until his mother became ill after working to clean BP's oil off of beaches. She has since died. The Reverend James Caldwell traveled from Houston to oppose the "exploitation of the Gulf," including that of his parishioners, from offshore drilling. Monique Verdin, a Native American Houma, never again wants to see her home in St. Bernard Parish buried beneath 11 feet of water, as it was during Hurricane Katrina.

Native Louisianan Cherri Foytlin's biggest fear hours earlier was that no one would join the protest. Instead, she beams with satisfaction. "Nothing like this has ever happened here," she says, as she and other protesters overtake the stage chanting, "It's not for sale, get off it, the Gulf is not for profit!" Foytlin leans over and tells the government auctioneer, "I need you to go back to the president" and tell him "this is the beginning."

**I • CLINTON, TRUMP AND DANGER OF WAR**

neoconservatives like Max Boot and Robert Kagan, have written that, should Trump be the nominee, “the only choice will be to vote for Hillary Clinton. The party cannot be saved, but the country still can be.”

In fact, it is Hillary Clinton that is the more dangerous warmonger. This reality is evident in what she has actually promoted and done, not just talked about. As Secretary of State Clinton essentially developed a dual presidency, where she pursued foreign policy and Obama often had to accept it. This was especially true in relation to Israel and Israeli aggression against the Palestinians and in the region. Connected with this, she is the one who said the U.S. should “exterminate Iran,” and opposed negotiations. She said, “I want the Iranians to know that if I’m president, we will attack Iran. In the next 10 years, during which they might foolishly consider launching an attack on Israel, we would be able to totally obliterate them.” She currently emphasizes more sanctions and continues to raise the threat of invasion.

Speaking recently at the American Israeli Political Affairs Committee, she emphasized that she would take the U.S.-Israeli “alliance a step further,” and as president a first act would be to invite the Israeli Prime Minister to the White House. Obama has recently refrained from doing so. Such visits are nearly always a prelude to increased Israeli aggression with U.S. backing and military funding. Speaking about Iran

and the agreement concerning nuclear weapons, she said, “This deal must come with vigorous enforcement, strong monitoring, clear consequences for any violations and a broader strategy to confront Iran’s aggression across the region.”

As Secretary of State she pushed for invading Syria, which was further confirmed by the recent release of her emails.

Clinton also directly oversaw the coup against Honduras and ensured the U.S.-installed military government held power. This was an example of her dual-presidency actions, as Obama was thought to support the return of elected President Zelaya. The installed government unleashed brutal suppression against the people, including use of assassinations, such as that most recently against human rights leader Berta Cáceres.

Clinton has long-standing and close ties to the military and NSA, something Trump lacks. She also has ties to leaders and military forces worldwide, which Trump also lacks. She is the one actually able to carry out U.S. plans for more aggression and war, while Trump is not. He is not trusted, nor supported by U.S. rulers and military, as the open stands to refuse to support him bring out. Clinton is, and she is all the more dangerous because she is not seen as dangerous.

It is also the case that much of what Trump talks about either is already taking place, or cannot be done. As president he cannot block all Muslims from entering the country. What he can do is what is already being done, which is to subject people from Syria, for example to more extensive, extra screenings. Similarly, how would he actually accomplish deporting 11 million people, and contend with the impact on the economy? Or force Mexico to pay for a wall? The U.S. relies on



immigrant labor, especially from Mexico, to force wages down and stir up fear and divisions within the working class.

A main purpose such proposals have is not so much actually implementing them, but rather to whip up U.S. chauvinism among the people, so as to support potential war against China, for example. Trump has been left free to incite divisions and chauvinism among the people, even while being opposed for the presidency. This serves the rulers, as to gain support for war among a population currently anti-war, such U.S. chauvinism is necessary.

While Trump is busy promoting such chauvinism, he also diverts from the greater danger posed by Clinton, who can and will wage more war, as her comments about Israel and Iran indicate. The U.S. ruling class is racist and chauvinist to the bone and always has been. Trump just wears those colors more openly.

For people in the U.S., the issue of U.S. wars and aggression are among the most crucial. To stand as one humanity against injustice, there is a responsibility to reject all U.S. wars and warmongers — Clinton being foremost among them.





### I • CONTINUE OUTREACH TO PARENTS

has still not released the overall numbers, these schools indicate that when parents and students are informed and armed with the facts, they choose to refuse.

*Buffalo Forum* salutes all those who joined in organizing two successful forums on testing, receivership and teaching the whole child, who distributed more than 3,000 leaflets in outreach to churches and the community, who provided materials to parents and teachers in and out of school, who investigated, discussed and got informed and joined the many tens of thousands statewide saying *We Refuse State Testing!*

The fight now turns to *Refusing Receivership*. The Common Core test and punish regime is still being used as the main means to put schools in receivership and keep them there. West Hertel and Futures Elementary Schools remain on the receivership list and will end their 1-year timeframe for “improvement” in June. This means Commissioner Elia can close them, give these public buildings to private charter schools, give them to an outside receiver, or keep them under receiver Cash. The decision is hers alone.

Further, ten of 25 Buffalo schools are supposed to be removed from the



receivership list by the end of June. However, Governor Cuomo has demanded that they remain in receivership. It remains unclear what will occur. It is also the case that Elia could add more schools to the list. She will likely announce her decisions mid-July, when school is out.

The important gains made in strengthening the test refusals need to be applied

to the fight against receivership. More outreach to parents and churches, providing information, developing discussion, speaking out at school board and union meetings are all needed. Initiative is in our hands and needs to be further advanced, by involving the new parents coming forward, extending work among immigrants and refugees, and strengthening work among students. The same spirit that has guided all these efforts — *Our Schools, Our Rights, We Decide!* — needs to be extended and further consolidated. By working and discussing together the fight to be decision makers in matters of education can be advanced.

Further, taking initiative on the front of alternatives to testing and receivership can also be done. This includes investigating a waiver from the testing, for everyone, and at least for English Language Learners. What should a portfolio-style assessment look like? What can we learn from the New York City consortium schools that already use it? Can we develop a summer project bringing students, parents and teachers together to develop such an alternative? Now is the time to think about and discuss these matters. Keep initiative in our hands as we fight for empowerment!

## Large Numbers of People Blocked from Voting in New York Primary

Voters in New York sent in more than 1,000 complaints to the attorney general's hotline, most concerning their inability to vote. This was six times more than those for the last presidential election in 2012. Like voters in Arizona, many had to wait hours in long lines. Other were sent to wrong polling stations. An estimated 126,000 people in Brooklyn were purged from the voter rolls, most wrongly so. Election officials could not explain an almost 7 percent drop in registered Democrats in the area.

The complaints were so widespread New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer promised an audit of the New York City Board of Elections. “The people of New York City have lost confidence that the Board of Elections can effectively administer elections and we intend to find out why the BOE is so consistently disor-

ganized, chaotic, and inefficient. With four elections in New York City in 2016 alone, we don't have a moment to spare,” he said. The New York state attorney general's office said that it too was overwhelmed by voter complaints.

Explanations from the BOE also showed how voter registration is used to remove people, rather than ensure they remain registered. For example, about 70,000 people were removed simply because they had not voted in two successive federal elections. They may have voted in local and state elections. And even if they had not, why force them to register yet again? The rules serve to block participation when what is needed is to encourage it.

Voter registration and manipulation of voter roles have long been political tools, used not only to give advantage to one

party over the other, but more importantly to block people from voting. African Americans have been a target from the beginning and remain one today, with voter suppression disproportionately impacting minority districts and polling stations. This also includes Latinos, as the closing of polling stations in their communities in Phoenix, for example, showed.

A modern election process requires that voter registration be removed from the hands of the Republicans and Democrats and be the responsibility of a separate, independent public authority whose job is to ensure everyone is registered and everyone is educated about their rights as voters, including the equal right to elect and be elected. Voting is a right that belongs to the people and requires a democratic process that empowers the people.

## Parents Reject District Pressure and Stand Up for Opting Out of Tests

Kristen Mendoza, Presented at the April 13 Buffalo School Board Meeting

I have been a parent in our district for 23 years. The last 17 of these years I have been a City Honors parent. I am here tonight in solidarity with City Honors parents and their children who were recently maligned and bullied by our principal for exercising their right to Opt Out of New York State assessments.

It is bad enough he sent the City Honors community a letter stating his opinion that Opt Out parents and students were “cowering.” But what is truly appalling is that he also spoke these words over the PA system, publicly shaming students and telling them their parents thought they were not up to the challenge. What kind of educator does this to children?

I am also standing in solidarity with the parents at the school where I teach. Our school received a visit last week from a district official (on the second day of testing), inquiring why our English Language Arts (ELA) Opt Outs were so high — 72 percent. I would like to explain the answer.

Our building is fortunate enough

to have a Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) that believes parents should be provided information on issues affecting their children. Our PTO recognizes that our parents are intelligent enough to analyze information and draw conclusions about it. When the latest Common Core Task Force’s findings were shared by our state education Commissioner, our PTO wanted to make certain our parents heard the other side. Our parents are aware of the Opt Out movement and wanted to know what it said about these particular findings.

In the weeks leading up to the ELA assessments, our PTO encouraged parents to attend two forums discussing high stakes testing and its ramifications. Our PTO did its homework and shared it with our parents.

Image, respecting parents enough to want them to make informed decisions about their children. Imagine encouraging parents to educate themselves on education issues. Imagine parents supporting another parent’s legal right to Opt Out their children from tests they have deemed inap-

propriate and harmful for their children. This is a PTO at its best.

Now ask yourself if it is appropriate for district officials to suggest to administrators that they call these parents and try to get them to opt back in to math assessments. Ask yourselves if it is appropriate for a district official to order an administrator to send a second letter home to parents reiterating our Superintendent’s message from Commissioner Elia about taking the tests just one week after the first letter was sent.

It should be noted that the maligning of parents and their rights occurring at City Honors and in my building based on opting out also happened at other Buffalo schools.

If the intelligence of our district’s parents is going to continue to be questioned, and if the decisions made on behalf of our children are going to be ridiculed and undermined, this board should understand why parents in our district are hard pressed to feel as though we parents are valued. Perhaps the truth is, we are not.

### REMOVE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

## NYSED Must Permanently Disconnect All Student Tests From Teacher, Principal and School Evaluations



*(Just before Common Core testing began in New York State, Education Commissioner Elia visited suburban schools in West Seneca and Lancaster. While these meetings were held at public schools, they were by invitation only and parent and teacher participation limited. Parents responded both by protesting outside the meetings and speaking inside as possible. Below are comments by Molly Dana, who decided to take a stand and demand answers from the Commissioner.*

\*\*\*

Welcome to West Seneca, Commissioner, and welcome to Allendale. I am sure when you walk these halls, you feel the love. This community values our public schools. We value

the teachers, principals and administration who share in the philosophy that each child is a unique individual learner with limitless potential. This community understands what a comprehensive education should be for their children.

Not only am I a parent in this amazing school district, but I represent over 500 parents belonging to the West Seneca Parents for Quality Education group. My husband and I are also steering committee members for Western New Yorkers for Public Education, with more than 3,000 members. We are also accompanied by fellow West Seneca parent advocates. We are against the test and punish reforms of the New York State Education Department (NYSED) and we have been actively resisting these reforms. The minimal

**Remove Common Core Standards • 11**



**WHY THE ATTACK ON PARENTS?**

# Testing Does Not Serve to Improve Learning, Planning or Curriculum

Just before Common Core State testing got underway in New York on April 6, State Education Commissioner Elia sent a letter to the *Buffalo News* concerning the tests. In the letter, Elia said the tests help educators plan for the coming school year. Buffalo Superintendent Cash then made a similar statement in a second letter that was sent home to Buffalo parents, urging them not to refuse the tests. Many parents felt this pressure to take the tests was in response to more and more parents becoming fully informed and deciding to refuse the tests. This feeling was confirmed. Parents in Buffalo schools that had high test refusals April 6, had yet a third letter sent home to them, with the district requiring principals to do so.

Why so much pressure when parents have decided? And why the use of statements that are not factual or accurate to do the convincing? Both are an indication that what the Commissioner and district really do not like is having parents stand up for their children and their equal right to education. Parents taking the stand that *We Decide* is to be stopped. Instead, district efforts only further strengthened resistance, as parents know the value of working and standing together to defend their children.

The *Buffalo News* then more openly attacked parents refusing the tests. In addition to more than five articles opposing

testing, the *News* said the Opt Out movement was “obstinate,” and that “Kids and schools pay the price for the terrible decisions” made by parents Opting Out. The *News* continued, saying the movement had “corrupted the ability of schools, districts and the State Education Department to measure how well students are learning, who needs help and how to improve the work of providing it.”

They, like the Commissioner and district letters, provided no facts, information, data or studies showing that state testing accurately measures anything. The tests specifically do not measure how well students are learning. It is well-established that assessing learning requires a more all-round approach, that includes grade-point averages, class participation and cooperation with others, expressions of creativity, participation in projects and more.

State testing does not raise the quality of education, does not improve learning, and does not accurately measure how a child is doing or how a particular school



or district is doing.

## **Look at the Facts**

Some actual facts are in order:

1) It is not the case that the tests provide information to teachers, students or parents “about the progress children are making,” or that “assists us in evaluating our curriculum.” No specific information is provided, so it is not known what each student did well on, what they did not and *why*. In

**Why Attack Parents • 12**

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## **10 • REMOVE COMMON CORE STANDARDS**

changes made to the tests this year are unacceptable. The following changes must be made to restore our trust and ensure that parents will opt back in:

1) NYSED MUST completely and permanently disconnect all student tests from all teacher, principal and school evaluations. Under the current moratorium, “growth” scores will still be calculated using students test data, and *after* the moratorium, will again be used to rate teachers, principals and schools. Because of the federal *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), disconnecting scores is now a

legislative possibility.

2) NYSED MUST make all testing and scoring completely transparent. Tests should be diagnostic and prescriptive. Tests should be written by NYS educators. All test items should be fully released to the public, as well as the scoring and how scores are calculated.

3) NYSED MUST remove Common Core Standards and replace them... Minor changes and clarifications are not acceptable.

4) NYSED MUST encourage our legislators to enact legislation that makes

it illegal to collect student data without written permission from the parent.

5) No state tests will be completed on a computer.

Parents will continue to refuse NYS assessments until changes that reflect the values and philosophy of our beloved public schools are implemented. Thank you, Commissioner. It is our hope that you hear our concerns and work with the Board of Regents to implement positive changes that our children, parents, teachers, principals and administrators deserve.

**11 • WHY ATTACK PARENTS**

addition, while a general graph is provided to teachers showing how groups of students did on various questions, it is not known

why they did well or poorly. Such information, for individuals and groups of students, is vital to guide learning. But it is not provided. Plus results are not returned until August or September, when the students have already gone on to the next grade.

2) A normal part of assessing learning is collective discussion among teachers, within similar subjects and grades and overall. But for the state exams, teachers are required to sign a “gag order,” saying they will not discuss the tests, not the questions, not the answers, nothing. How then can the tests be used to improve learning and how best to teach various materials? How can teachers work together to assist students in overcoming problems when they are not provided information to identify the problems and cannot discuss their own views on the tests?

3) The tests *do* turn students into numbers. Every student is given a number, a 1,

2, 3, or 4, with 1 the lowest, and now some schools even brand children as a zero, based *solely* on these tests. Children’s grades, participation in class, projects in science and other subjects, development in music, art, sports — none of this is assessed by these state tests. These are more important and more valid in determining how children and schools are doing. Yet these facts are ignored and students are labeled as “failures” based on a single state test. And children are talked about as numbers, “we have to turn more twos into threes” for example. Our children are not numbers, they are not prisoners or products — they are human beings. Labeling them as numbers is a way to deny their humanity and deny their rights.

4) To the degree the tests are used for curriculum, it is not to improve and broaden the quality, to include African American studies, for example, but to narrow curriculum. Subjects are cut or limited. Despite the fact that for the past two years, every student in a music program has graduated — music is being cut. Numerous studies have shown that music has a very positive impact on learning, which is why parents are demanding it for *all* students. The letters home to parents did not provide any studies or facts to show that state testing improves learning.

5) Commissioner Elia and Dr. Cash, while admitting parents here and statewide have expressed serious concerns about the *harm* the tests are causing, did not seriously address these concerns. Many parents said

that the tests were too long. The response? They have been shortened by a few questions, hardly a significant amount. The tests are developmentally inappropriate, something confirmed by experts in the field. Questions include content not taught, or that are 1-2 grades higher, rightly causing frustration and recognized as unfair.

6) It is claimed that the tests keep “children most at risk” from “slipping through the cracks.” The opposite is actually happening. English Language Learners (ELL) and special needs students are especially harmed by these tests, which are not appropriate or fair for them. Further, high levels of anxiety are occurring because students, repeatedly told they are failures, know the results are being used against their teachers and schools. Custodians reported being called to clean up vomit from young children as soon as the tests started, for example. Teachers and parents do not need such tests to know which children need help and they are best suited to decide what is needed, not the tests.

Parents, teachers and students rightly refused the state tests and are demanding an alternative, like that already used by Consortium schools in New York City. A portfolio-based assessment is used, that takes into account the students’ passions, projects, and abilities of all kinds. Far from pressuring parents to take these unfair and invalid state tests, the Commissioner should congratulate all those who defended their children and their right to education by standing up to refuse the tests!

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**5 • SOLAR ENERGY**

Photovoltaic arrays are indisputably becoming more affordable, which is a good sign. Typically, the more people adopt a product, the further down the price goes, as companies can invest in mass production and development that ultimately saves money across the board — just like buying in bulk is cheaper than picking up packaged versions of the same foods.

Integrating rooftop solar should not

just be about retrofitting existing homes. The DOE wants to see it integrated right into community development plans and long-term city planning to encourage people to build solar generation into new development.

Such planning can include the use of financial and social incentives to encourage developers and homeowners to think solar from the start, and over time, solar could meet more and more

of our energy needs — the study points out that it does not even account for ground-based arrays, which would also cut down on the use of non-renewable sources. [...]

Solar can quietly generate energy on roofs across the country, while large arrays can be placed in more remote areas with ample sunlight to generate energy without altering views, [see proposal for Niagara Falls Air Base, p.5].



## It is Time to Get Cops Out of Schools

*Karen Dolan, Institute for Policy Studies*

I am still shaking from watching the recently released video of a white, uniformed police officer violently body-slaming a 12-year-old Latina girl face-first into a brick walkway. You can hear a “crack” when her face slams into the brick.

The child was reportedly talking with another student when other kids gathered to see if there was an argument brewing. Officer Joshua Kehm apparently didn’t want to wait to see if the middle schoolers would indeed start arguing.

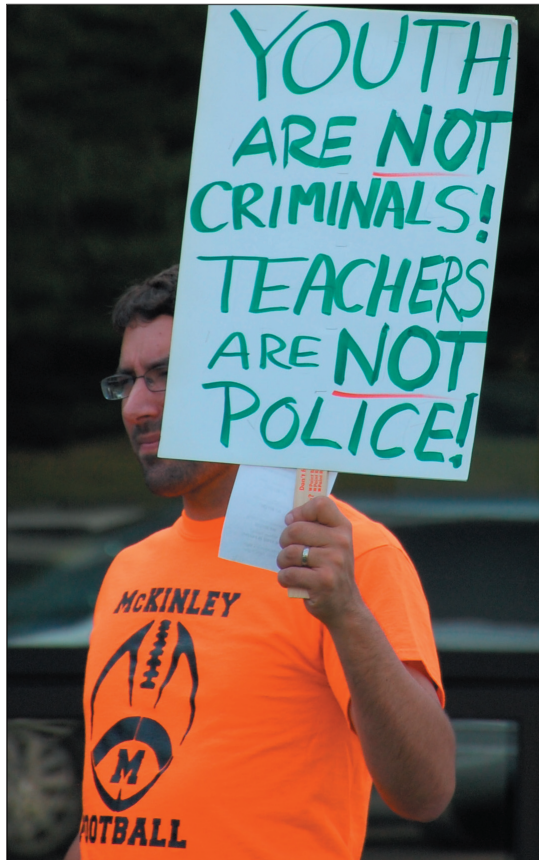
Kehm was fired after the video was released, but it is the school-to-prison pipeline he represents that most deserves to be indicted. Officers like Kehm send thousands of children into the legal system each year for petty misbehavior at school — or, often, for no misbehavior at all.

Schools with embedded police officers — often euphemistically referred to as “School Resource Officers,” or SROs — see five times the number of arrests for “disorderly conduct” than schools without them. According to the Justice Policy Institute, in schools where SROs are allowed to arrest or refer children to the juvenile justice system, kids are getting criminal records for low-level status offenses — that is, offenses that are only illegal because of their status as a juvenile, including wildly subjective charges like “disruptive behavior.”

SRO policing happens primarily in low-income schools attended by children of color. While kids from financially stable families in predominantly white schools go to the principal’s office, kids from these poorer schools go to lock-up.

Worse still, these kids find themselves subject to the same kinds of violent police behavior that plagues the rest of the criminal justice system.

A similar disturbing video spread through social media last fall when an SRO threw a black girl across her classroom floor because she wouldn’t relinquish her cell phone. More violent video emerged from Baltimore, where a uniformed officer



hit a black female student with a baton, inflicting injuries requiring ten stitches. Similar scenarios have played out in Florida and Virginia and, last October, in Oklahoma — where an SRO punched a teen in the head twice when he caught him in the hallway without a bathroom pass. The reality is that these incidents are far too common where police are given authority to discipline children in schools.

While juvenile detention rates have steadily decreased in the last two decades, arrests of children of color — especially black and Latina girls at schools — have not followed that same pattern. Black girls are experiencing the fastest growth in juvenile incarceration and the highest levels of middle school suspensions. And, as the African American Policy Forum reports, black girls also experience harsher sentences once in the juvenile system than any other demographic of girls.

Disabled and low-income black and

Latino boys also continue to suffer suspensions, expulsions, and school referrals to the juvenile justice system disproportionately to their white peers.

These criminalizing, dehumanizing, and ineffective responses to childish behavior are the core the school-to-prison pipeline. And once a child has contact with the juvenile legal system, studies show it’s very hard for them to get out. The recidivism rate for juveniles is reported to be as high as 70 percent, with the initial detention being the most significant factor affecting recidivism.

The first thing we need to do is to get police out of schools. School administrators and counselors should be properly trained to treat trauma and address the complex stressors that more acutely affect children living in poverty. Policies should explicitly address the unique stressors and dangers to girls, particularly girls of color.

More broadly, in their efforts to address behavior that breaks or challenges school rules, schools should shift to restorative justice models that focus on relationship building among students, teachers, and administrators. Out-of-school suspensions and expulsions should be off the table. Schools should be nurturing, safe, learning environments — especially for our most at-risk student populations.

Deeper structural changes would include a fairer federal, state, and county tax system that stops the obscene income and wealth inequality that is increasing the segregation of our schools by race and income. Adequate funding for housing, communities, schools, faculty, mental health, and public health are all necessary to stop the systematic abuse of our schoolchildren.

But first, get police out of schools — and keep their hands, batons, and cuffs off our children. Let us be sure no more young girls are body-slammed face-first into brick walkways by uniformed officers in middle schools.

**HOMEWORK IS WRECKING OUR KIDS**

# The Research is Clear, Let Us Ban Elementary Homework

*Heather Shumaker, Salon.com*

“There is no evidence that any amount of homework improves the academic performance of elementary students.”

This statement, by homework research guru Harris Cooper, of Duke University, is startling to hear, no matter which side of the homework debate you’re on. Can it be true that the hours of lost playtime, power struggles and tears are all for naught? That millions of families go through a nightly ritual that doesn’t help? Homework is such an accepted practice, it is hard for most adults to even question its value.

When you look at the facts, however, here is what you find: Homework has benefits, but its benefits are age dependent.

For elementary-aged children, research suggests that studying in class gets superior learning results, while extra schoolwork at home is just . . . extra work. Even in middle school, the relationship between homework and academic success is minimal at best. By the time kids reach high school, homework provides academic benefit, but only in moderation. More than two hours per night is the limit. After that amount, the benefits taper off. “The research is very clear,” agrees Etta Kralovec, education professor at the University of Arizona. “There’s no benefit at the elementary school level.”

Before going further, let us dispel the myth that these research results are due to a handful of poorly constructed studies. In fact, it’s the opposite. Cooper compiled 120 studies in 1989 and another 60 studies in 2006. This comprehensive analysis of multiple research studies found no evidence of academic benefit at the elementary level. It did, however, find a negative impact on children’s attitudes toward school.

This is what is worrying. Homework does have an impact on young students, but it’s not a good one. A child just beginning school deserves the chance to develop a love of learning. Instead, homework at a young age causes many kids to turn against school, future homework and academic learning. And it’s a long road. A child in kindergarten is facing 13 years of

homework ahead of her.

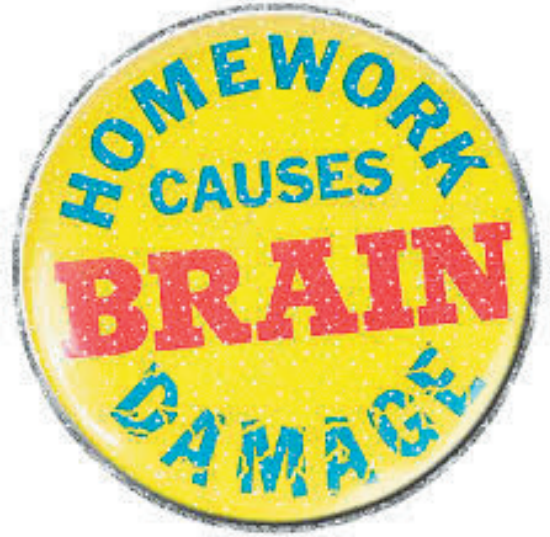
Then there’s the damage to personal relationships. In thousands of homes across the country, families battle over homework nightly. Parents nag and cajole. Overtired children protest and cry. Instead of connecting and supporting each other at the end of the day, too many families find themselves locked in the “did you do your homework?” cycle.

When homework comes prematurely, it’s hard for children to cope with assignments independently—they need adult help to remember assignments and figure out how to do the work. Kids slide into the habit of relying on adults to help with homework or, in many cases, do their homework. Parents often assume the role of Homework Patrol Cop. Being chief nag is a nasty, unwanted job, but this role frequently lingers through the high school years. Besides the constant conflict, having a Homework Patrol Cop in the house undermines one of the purported purposes of homework: responsibility.

## **Ban Homework in Elementary School**

Homework supporters say homework teaches responsibility, reinforces lessons taught in school, and creates a home-school link with parents. However, involved parents can see what is coming home in a child’s backpack and initiate sharing about school work – they do not need to monitor their child’s progress with assigned homework.

Responsibility is taught daily in multiple ways; that is what pets and chores are for. It takes responsibility for a 6-year-old to remember to bring her hat and lunchbox home. It takes responsibility for an 8-year-old to get dressed, make his bed and get out the door every morning. As for reinforcement, that is an important factor, but it is only one factor in learning.



Non-academic priorities (good sleep, family relationships and active playtime) are vital for balance and well-being. They also directly impact a child’s memory, focus, behavior and learning potential. Elementary lessons are reinforced every day in school. After-school time is precious for the rest of the child.

What works better than traditional homework at the elementary level is simply reading at home. This can mean parents reading aloud to children as well as children reading. The key is to make sure it is joyous. If a child does not want to practice her reading skills after a long school day, let her listen instead. Any other projects that come home should be optional and occasional. If the assignment does not promote greater love of school and interest in learning, then it has no place in an elementary school-aged child’s day.

Elementary school kids deserve a ban on homework. This can be achieved at the family, classroom or school level. Families can opt out, teachers can set a culture of no homework (or rare, optional homework), and schools can take time to read the research and rekindle joy in learning.

Homework has no place in a young child’s life. With no academic benefit, there are simply better uses for after-school hours.



## Teamsters Defend the Right to Pensions

Alexandra Bradbury, *Labor Notes*, April 22, 2016

More than 2,000 retirees and Teamsters from 20 states rallied in front of the U.S. Capitol April 14, calling on the Treasury Department to stop their pensions from being slashed by 50 to 70 percent.

The department's Special Master Kenneth Feinberg is slated to make a recommendation to the Treasury by May 7 on whether to accept the cuts proposed by the Central States Pension Fund, which would impact 410,000 Teamsters and retirees from Florida to Minnesota.

Retirees have formed "Committees to Protect Pensions" in at least 20 cities [including Buffalo]. These committees organized the rally, with support from the Teamsters and other organized forces.

Davey Grubbs, a volunteer organizer of the North Carolina Committee to Protect Pensions, drove for almost 32 years, beginning at age 21 — mostly doing carhaul, a physically taxing job that involves loading cars onto trucks. After two back surgeries, a doctor told him he could not go back to work. But Grubbs, determined to get his full pension, kept working "till I couldn't feel my feet anymore." After a third back surgery, he is permanently disabled.

"Basically I gave my health for the pension," he said, "and now they're trying to take it away." His pension would be reduced from \$3,400 a month to \$1,261, and the age he could draw it without penalty would rise from 62 to 65.

The North Carolina Committee sent four busloads of activists, including Brad

Colesworthy, who retired after driving a truck for 32 years. Colesworthy will see his pension cut almost in half, from \$2,500 to \$1,303 a month, if the cuts go through. He is concerned about his wife's medical bills and their mortgage. So at age 75, he is back to work full-time, driving a school bus.

Central States [Pension Fund] projects that it only has \$18 billion available to pay the \$34 billion it owes to current and future retirees, after the Fund lost \$8.8 billion in the 2008 stock market crash. At the time, Goldman Sachs and Northern Trust were running the Fund's investments, thanks to a 1982 consent decree [imposed by the government, supposedly] to rid the Fund of corruption.

[Since Goldman played such a large role in bringing on the financial crisis, many consider they should be held accountable for funding now needed — BF Ed. Note].

### Grassroots Movement

In North Carolina, retiree activists began their organizing by holding small meetings in restaurants. After the Fund sent letters out last year to notify individuals just how much their pensions would be cut, "that's when we really started cranking up," Colesworthy said. "We had meetings all over the state."

They organized bus trips to Washington, D.C., to lobby their senators and representatives, rallied in front of a congressman's local office, and held letter-writing drives, generating 3,000 letters at a time.

"Our feeling is, if they can get away with something like this, what's next? Is it Social Security?" Colesworthy said. "This basically opens the door to any pension fund that has been underfunded or mismanaged to submit the same application."

Congress brought on the problem when it



passed the *Multiemployer Pension Reform Act* in December 2014, after heavy lobbying from the Fund, with no public hearings and no debate. Neither the House nor the Senate voted on the bill; it was attached to the omnibus budget bill, literally in the middle of the night. [...]

### Next, a Congressional Vote?

If Treasury rejects the Fund's proposal, the retirees will get some breathing room. The matter would be back in the hands of Congress, where it is unlikely anything good or bad could pass till after November's elections.

On the other hand, if Treasury approves the cuts, the Fund has 30 days to put the plan to a vote by members. In that case, "we will do everything we can to vote it down," Grubbs said. "Unfortunately, they stacked the cards against us."

The law allows a vote by email — which many retirees do not use — and if you do not vote, it counts as a yes. "So much for democracy," Grubbs said.

If members vote no, the law permits the Treasury Department to overturn the vote — and denies the retirees the right to sue. [Through their actions, many retirees are taking the stand that Congress does not have the right to take away pensions, which belong to all as a human right. — BF Ed. Note.]

### SUPPORT VERIZON STRIKERS!



**DEMAND GOVERNMENT BACK CENTRAL STATES FUND**

## **Pensions Are A Right!**

The government is considering allowing the Teamsters' Central States Pension Fund, which covers more than 410,000 workers, to cut pension benefits by 50-60 percent. Many, for example, will see their pensions fall from \$40,000 a year to \$16,000 — that is below the poverty line. The \$18.7 billion Fund is the nation's second-largest multiemployer pension plan. Similar multiemployer union plans, all government-insured, cover an estimated 10 million Americans in the private sector workforce. Many are now underfunded and at least a million workers face similar cuts. The Upstate New York Pension Plan, for example, covering 35,000 Teamsters, has just announced its own first steps to slash benefits.

Workers have been protesting and organizing in many cities for several months, including a rally at the Capitol in Washington, DC. Teamsters from Buffalo participated alongside those from many other cities. Actions, including pickets and meetings of hundreds have taken place across the country. Eight hundred filled a hall for a recent rally in Detroit. Columbus and Kansas City drew 500 and 1,200, Minneapolis 750, Milwaukee 300, Cincinnati 200, Houston 300. Retirees have formed "Committees to Protect Pensions" in 20 cities, with Facebook pages set up in a dozen more. All are demanding that the government block the cuts and fully fund the pensions. As many bring out, the government provided the Wall Street financiers with a \$700 billion bailout in 2008, but is refusing to fund pensions for retirees. An estimated \$42 billion would cover current gaps in the multiemployer union pension plans.

The Central States Fund is among the first, and largest, demanding cuts and workers are acting to prevent such a precedent, knowing that many more retirees can be impacted in the future.

The government, far from guaranteeing



these pensions that belong to workers by right, is the one behind these cuts. During budget battles last year, with a government shutdown threatened, language was inserted into the "cromnibus" budget bill in the middle of the night. There was no debate, many did not even know it was in the giant bill. The language required pension trustees to make pension funds whole exclusively by cutting retirement benefits. Retirees and members are also blocked from contesting such cuts in court. While retirees can vote on reductions, the Secretary of the Treasury can override any vote and slash benefits if the secretary deems such cuts to be "systemically important."

The Central States fund is a "defined benefit plan," with workers getting a set, "defined" amount, depending on their years of service and age at retirement. Many workers sacrificed wage increases

to ensure pension benefits — meaning pensions are basically deferred wages. Cutting them is a way of stealing wages for work already done.

### **Wall Street Makes Big Score**

It is also the case that the large Wall Street firms manage many of these funds. The Teamster fund, for example, was taken over by the government in 1982 in the name of blocking union "corruption." In recent years, the government gave the bulk of the fund's assets to big financial monopolies, including Morgan Stanley, Northern Trust, JPMorgan Chase and Goldman Sachs.

All the discretionary investment decisions for Central States Pension Fund are made by financial firms rather than by the fund's board. Roughly a third of the pension system's shortfalls — or almost \$9 billion — can be traced to investment losses accrued during the financial industry's 2008 collapse. And while the fund lost, these financiers made a big score, grabbing more than \$250 million in fees in just the last 5 years. But the government is not holding them accountable for making the pension plans whole!

In addition, these monopolies had the plans invest in their companies. By 2010, Goldman Sachs ensured the Fund owned \$43 million in Goldman stocks and bonds. Similarly, Northern Trust directed the Fund to purchase \$400,000 in their corporate bonds. As one expert says, the government claims to be concerned about corruption, but "doesn't seem interested in looking into whether or not Wall Street is on the take."

Pensions are a human right that belong to workers by right. It is the duty of government to guarantee this right. The workers are refusing to take the blame or bear the burden of Wall Street and government failures. They are demanding their pensions be funded in full now!