

A Call for Democratic Education

By M.M.

The current education system has failed to meet the needs of students, teachers, and society as a whole. One reason for this is the direction the education system has headed. That being in the direction of hierarchy, standardization, and the alienation of learning from the student. This is the wrong direction, and it is captained by those who should have no say in the matter. Administrators, politicians, and directors are all people who are not in the classroom and thus are separated from the very environment they are controlling. Education must become democratic. I do not mean the idea of a “representative democracy.” That is not a democracy. I mean a directly democratic education.

The current system is built upon outdated and faulty notions of what learning is. The idea that students are buckets to be filled. This has created the problem of what to fill the bucket with, leading education reform to focus on standardization. These standards breed disengagement on the part of the student and hammers out their natural creativity and innate desire to learn. Students only learn to memorize and obey, not to actually internalize the information. Standardized testing only deepens this value of memorization and obedience. It also tells students, and society at large, that these topics are what is considered intelligence. This is not to say that some students aren't able to survive this environment with good grades, but it is at the cost of their creativity and ability to learn. Many have to struggle needlessly hard, and many more fail and grow to despise learning. This system lacks adaptability, student engagement, and

the environment to foster a love of learning. Teachers, as hard as they try, are not in a position to fix this. The system itself is inherently flawed, and the teachers are not in a position to change the system. Education reform is not handled by teachers, but by people completely removed from the classroom.

To counter the current system and address the flaws within it, democratic education provides answers and an alternative. Where the current system builds from hierarchy, democratic education's foundation starts within the classroom. It is based upon values of student-centered education and individualized learning. Giving students a direct voice in their own education and the function of their school. In the same way a worker should own their own labor, a student should own their own education. This is not to say the teacher is subservient to the student. It is to say that the student and the teacher are equals in the classroom, both working towards a common goal. This requires students to have direct input on aspects of the classroom, such as the syllabus, classroom rules, and how they are to be evaluated. This can also expand outside of just the classroom, but also to the school level. Allowing students a direct say in how the school operates and their curriculum. Students and teachers would work together in free and open discussion to better meet the needs of both. Skeptics might call this utopian, but there are real-world examples we can draw from. Ranging from the anarchist schools of Spain, the Ferrer Movement, the Yasnaya Polyana school of Leo Tolstoy, or the Free School Movement.

To achieve this, it is important to build the system we want within the system of old. It is not enough to simply build the schools we want as alternatives and outside of the system, but to change the system from within through organizing. Students must organize themselves into horizontally organized student unions. Unions that are built around the ideas and principles of anti-hierarchy, free association, mutual aid, discussion and consensus, and egalitarianism.

Students need to organize and work with their teachers as well as other essential staff of their schools in order to create an environment that is reflective of these unions. A school that is designed around these ideas and principles. This should not be limited to just your school but also spread and coordinated with other schools as a large-scale movement. We must demand systemic change, not just superficial concessions. This responsibility is also not left solely in the hands of the students, but all necessary aspects of a school. Teachers, janitors, secretaries, school drivers, librarians, and all roles deemed necessary for a school's function should also organize and work together to achieve this change.

The system as it stands now fails to meet the needs of anyone but the state and the capitalists. It is not a system of education, but of domination and exploitation. It is felt by everyone who works in these schools. This necessitates change, change that must come from the bottom. This is a call for action for all who are failed and exploited by this system to build a new system around the ideas of democratic education. A system of equality, a love of learning, and freedom. Students, organize yourselves. Talk to your friends and peers and organize your classrooms. Talk to your teachers and include them. Build democratic classrooms and cultivate them in other classrooms. Teachers, talk to your coworkers and your students and build this change together. Administrators and politicians work against your interests because it profits them. Make the school function despite them and without them. Unionize, demand this change, and accept nothing less.