

Everyone Has to Go to College?
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When President Obama appointed Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education, most educators were terribly disappointed. They knew that Duncan, as CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, had been very good at carrying out the corporate high-stakes testing agenda, the goal of which is to increase the percentage of those going to college. For working class parents this is a no-brainer. We are inundated with the cliché (that fills our ears in the same way that air fills our lungs) that “a high school diploma is no longer sufficient to get a well paying job...One must have a college degree to have a decent life.” We are also told again and again and again that one in ten high school pushouts end up in prison and one in four African Americans who are pushed out of high school end up in prison. The “achievement gap is the 21st century civil rights issue.”

As a result, nonprofits that organize communities of color and working class parents have organized around “closing the achievement” gap, uncritical of the inherent problems of doing so. The “achievement gap” is the difference by racial/ethnic groups according to graduation and pushout rates and standardized test scores. Asians and whites graduate and go on to college in disproportionate numbers from black and brown student. To “close the achievement gap” apparently means that college-going rates of every ethnic/racial category would be proportional to their percentage of the population. This would increase college going rates overall, assuming that white and Asian students would continue to go to college at the same rates they do now.

Certainly, you can't go to college without graduating from high school. But, can you graduate from high school and not be able go to college? Yes. Can you qualify for college and not afford to go? Yes. Can you have a good paying job without a college degree? Yes. Can you have a college degree and not be able to find a good paying job? Yes. Can you “close the achievement gap” and still have disproportionate numbers of black and brown people occupying prisons and low wage jobs? Yes. If everyone goes to college, will labor unions become more effective in protecting the rights of workers? Will corporate lobbyists have less influence on politicians? Will institutional racism disappear?

Even before the Great Recession hit, the U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics reported that there were 5 people looking for work for every one job in this country. Eight percent of those with PhDs were earning minimum wage or below. Do community organizers believe that organizing around increased access to college will change the fortunes of those they are organizing when only 20 percent of the jobs in the U.S. require a college degree? Especially when those offering such jobs have been turning away white middle class college graduates for decades? Furthermore, if going to college becomes the standard by which every parent and child judges themselves successful, what about those who don't want to or cannot go to college? Are they failures? Do they deserve to have a low wage job and poor housing?

Socialists want to tear down the capitalist system since it seems incapable of providing everyone with a living wage job under decent conditions, health care, affordable housing, and safe neighborhoods. But one cannot destroy something unless you have created alternative structures and a clear alternative vision. Community organizers aren't creating those alternative structures and vision. Instead, they are working with the corporate playbook that perpetuates the myth that college/career readiness will lead to social justice in America.