

An Anti-Capitalist Class Analysis of the K12 Education System: A Political Guide for Radical Educators and Organizers

Introduction

When I look into the face of a student, I see a human face. As an educator in schools there's a feeling of responsibility that pulls on me to preserve their humanity, partly by my own efforts to make things fair and keep them safe in school and partly by helping them learn the skills to make things fair and keep themselves safe when they enter the "real" world. How to be faithful to the whole of a child's current being and future potential is the daunting task all educators face. Even under perfect conditions this task is difficult enough. Under the conditions of the education system we find ourselves in this task all too often becomes impossible.

The multitude of problems in the school system leads any caring educator to ask larger questions about why things are the way they are. "Life's not fair" is one answer, one we tell ourselves as often as we tell our students. If we don't see agency in ourselves or in others, accepting the problems of the existing world as inevitable can be the first step in hardening ourselves and others as a strategy for mental and biological survival. "Life's not fair, but..." accepts the world as it is in the present but makes space for the ability of the world to be changed in the future.

When an educator looks a student in the eye, what about their economic relationship shapes what the educator sees? The educator is paid to be there and the student is compelled by their family and the legal system to be there. These are partly class relations, relations of people in specific economic positions who encounter each other in the context of larger economic systems.

My most dispiriting encounter with the education system occurred when I was teaching 40 hours a week at a private summer school in Los Angeles making \$10/hr. My job was to force a classroom full of 6th graders to do worksheets all day, five days a week. The curriculum was a stack of photocopies of the worksheet pages from outdated textbooks. Because this was summer and kids hate staying indoors and doing worksheets when they should be outside playing with their friends, my students needed a fair amount of "cajoling" to complete their worksheets. When the students weren't doing their job and I was insufficiently forceful in nudging them, my supervisor would come in and yell at the kids extra-loud, partly to whip them into shape and partly to show me how it's done. It was humiliating for my students and for me. I felt like I was destroying something in these kids and I couldn't bear it. I quit after only working there a month even though I really needed the money.

Capitalism looks different across different industries, regions, cultures, and workplaces, and those of us who want to build a movement against capitalism should always be thinking through ways of applying anti-capitalist analysis to our organizing and making those ideas relevant and practical to the communities we're organizing in. At first blush none of the traditional economic categories of capitalism apply to public education, but further inquiry reveals that these economic categories are still very present and have merely taken on modified forms.

Those of us participating in or eagerly observing the recent tide of militant educator organizing and strikes could benefit from a more theoretical grounding of leftist ideas in the analysis of our schools. This post takes an economic look at the education system from the perspective of educators as workers under capitalism.

Capitalism vs. Humanity

The education system is an enormously complex system that fulfills various social roles and is under a litany of often opposing pressures. Trying to make sense of it is a tricky task, but trying to make sense of it in isolation from larger socio-economic pressures is like explaining the orbit of the planets while ignoring the gravity of the sun. The key to critiquing the K12 education system under capitalism is identifying what capitalist education is and measuring the distance between the education system under capitalism and an education system that meets the full range of human needs and allows students to develop a wide range of human abilities.

Any social system is designed to embody certain values. If **democracy**, **fairness**, **human flourishing**, and **equality** are fundamental and interconnected values we want to see in society, those are the values that would be embodied in an education system designed to meet human needs.

Capitalism has a separate logic, whereby the values of those empowered by capitalism (the rich who own the companies and the real estate) are prioritized above the values of those who are marginalized by capitalism (those who work for a living). Capitalism also works by privileging and marginalizing different groups of people according to race, gender, sexuality, and other social markers. Getting a clear image of capitalist education then is about figuring out how capitalism prioritizes the needs of the power-holders under capitalism while shunning the needs of those disempowered under capitalism.

Distinguishing features of capitalism's realization in the education system are the following:

1. The primary stakeholders in the education system are given little formal influence in how schools are run. Students, educators, and parents don't govern the schools by setting and implementing policy, principals and superintendents do. The decision-making structure in the school is largely the same as the decision-making structure in the factory. This is a subversion of democracy in the education system.

2. The supposed success of one's education is defined in terms of test scores on highly standardized tests and narrow curriculums, prioritizing math and reading over art, music, emotional intelligence, etc... These narrow curriculums are designed to meet the more narrow needs of employers to make profit off of workers over and against the needs of young and developing humans. Students and teachers alike are disciplined and controlled around maximizing these test scores, much like workers are disciplined to maximize profits in the private sector. This is a subversion of fairness and human flourishing in the education system.
3. Funding for schools comes from taxes, and the rich have incentives to try to cut taxes because of the progressive and redistributive nature of taxation, including taxes that pay more to fund the education of kids other than their own. To the extent that the rich do submit to paying taxes for education, they prioritize the funding and quality of schools for their kids over the funding and quality of schools for poor kids. This is a subversion of equality in the education system.

The features of an education system that would be based on human needs and values would be a mirror image of those we find under capitalism:

1. The primary stakeholders in the education system should have individual and communal self-determination over decision-making.
2. Education should aim for a holistic understanding and serving of the needs and interests of children apart from merely their later roles as sponges to be squeezed for profit in the job market.
3. Resource allocation for education should be based on meeting child and educator needs instead of on meeting the needs of rich taxpayers.

There's a tendency among even progressives and lefties, including educators, to see capitalism as somehow totally separate from the education system because on the surface the education system is state-funded, there isn't a profit motive, and there's not some specific product being produced for market. I think these assumptions are false and lead to counter-productive strategies for fighting back. If you think capitalism in the education system is good or not worth challenging, you agree to some degree with the logic of the first three points enumerated above. If you think the influence of capitalism on the education system is bad and worth fighting against, you agree more with the last three points.

The prototypical capitalist relation is that between the worker in a factory manufacturing commodities and the capitalist who owns the factory and who pays for the workers' labor in return for ownership of what the worker produces. This boils down class relations to their barest elements and is still a useful reference point, but what capitalism looks like is different in each context, especially in the 21st century US where factory manufacturing plays a much smaller role in the economy than it did 100 years ago.

This post will look at the major concepts of capitalist production (commodities, workers, bosses, capitalists) and investigate how they apply to the K12 education industry. Specifically, for each of these concepts I'll look at 1) how K12 education compares and contrasts to traditional factory production, 2) how capitalism structures the education system to meet its needs, and 3) what alternative approaches to education might look like and how to fight for them.

Of course, as in any system of domination and exploitation, under capitalism there is always resistance and spaces being opened up for opposing power relations. The factory worker was never merely a maker of widgets but also was active in fighting for better working conditions, higher wages, and a better social order. This article will try to tease apart the state of the education system as it actually exists as a result of the capitalist pressures imposed on it from above and the working class and liberatory pressures placed on it from below.

The Commodity: Making Students into Workers

In factory manufacturing, material goods are the commodity. Assembly lines are organized to put many different kinds of human labor into molding a final product that is useful to people and thus can be sold to consumers.

In the education system under capitalism, turning children into workers is the production process. "Good" workers *are* the commodity, the product. The assembly line consists not only of teachers and education assistants, but also the bus drivers, the cafeteria workers, the custodians, etc... School children who are given marketable skills and then become workers are not commodities to be "sold" directly to consumers in the same sense as a pair of jeans. But the same overall logic still applies.

Just like the raw materials of fabric and thread that enters the pants factory and comes out a wearable piece of clothing, so the raw material of the child enters the school system and comes out an employable worker. But whereas the pants are sold directly to those who want them, workers aren't sold by others. Instead, the workers sell time-slots of themselves to employers in the form of labor-time which is paid for in wages and salaries. As a commodity, the worker still gets sold, it's just that the workers themselves are the sellers as well as the commodity. Like any commodity, the production of that commodity prioritizes the needs of the buyers (in this case, the employers).

Above I said that "good" workers are the commodity. Workers defined as "good" under capitalism 1) have skills that employers need and 2) are obedient. Regarding the first, employers hire workers who can perform tasks that are profitable to the employer. Many of these things may be unpleasant or unsafe or uninteresting to the worker themselves (think of all the menial labor in the US and across the globe), but that is not a primary concern as long as those things are profitable. The way this looks in schools at their worst is students are made to do lots of repetitive busy work that mirrors the work of a worker on the factory assembly line

whose only job is to attach part A to part B of a device hundreds of times an hour. This kind of deadening of mental and physical creativity at work serves a socio-economic function under capitalism and the education system dutifully prepares workers for it.

Of course, not all workers perform such menial tasks at their jobs. Some employers require highly skilled workers who also need creativity to do their job well. While the stereotype projects skilled workers as “professionals” like lawyers, doctors, and such, most jobs require tons of different kinds of complex skills, it’s just that some skills are highly or lowly financially valued for various reasons. Schools can impart any kind of skills in such a way as to produce able workers who are profitable to employers. Whether schools focus on rote learning or more creative and critical thinking often reflects the class backgrounds of the students attending the schools. In many ways it’s easier and fits better within the workings of the labor market to offload the skills training that employers might have to do and make the education system do it. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it’s just to point out that the production of high skilled, creative workers through the education system is not the subversion of capitalist logic but just one expression of it.

One might ask at this point, “Well the capitalist system can’t pressure schools to both create menial laborers and highly-skilled creative workers? Which one is it? Make up your mind!” The way this happens in the school system is through the sorting of students through grading and differing tracks for more and less “advanced” or “deficient” students. The grading system plays a pivotal role in this sorting because it isn’t just used for helpful feedback but to rank, reward, and punish students and adjust their access to future education opportunities.

This sorting happens not just within schools, but also between schools. For example, some schools, especially those in higher income areas, have more resources to give higher quality instruction while schools in poverty-stricken areas often have fewer resources which results in higher class sizes and more rote instruction. Local property taxes are a major determinant of school funding, which then is one more way that class positions are passed down over generations.

The way the current school system sorts students into different kinds of jobs might otherwise be at least a little reasonable for meeting the needs of a modern economy with many different kinds of jobs if not for the vast difference in pay, respect, and enjoyment there is between these different kinds of jobs. The effect of all this sorting is that often from an early age some students are tracked to become menial and low-paid workers and others are tracked to become more highly paid workers. The capitalist class itself can afford all the luxuries that the most highly-resourced education schools can provide, and since wealth is passed down by inheritance and parents who are able to spend more money preparing their children privileged positions, their place at the top of the economic hierarchy is maintained.

At the bottom of the sorting pile are those who end up in prison. With the rise of mass incarceration in the 1980s in the US (despite decreasing crime rates from the 1990s onward to

historic lows at present), the education system has been a major contributor to this system and has created new forms of sorting to accommodate mass incarceration. These new institutional forms in education are known as the school-to-prison pipeline.

For example, police officers were put in schools in a widespread, unprecedented way supposedly in response to the big school shootings of the 90s, like Columbine. But the effect of these police officers has been to give students criminal records at a young age while having virtually no impact on actually [reducing school shootings](#). The school shootings were a mere pretext and the real function of filling schools with cops was to intensify the school-to-prison pipeline that plays a central role in sorting in the education system. The war on drugs and the accompanying social policies based on the “tough on crime” mantra have been adapted for schools in the form of “zero tolerance” discipline policies. White supremacy is a major overlapping part of the school-to-prison pipeline where black, brown, and indigenous students are targeted. Whereas before mass incarceration, most of those at the bottom of the education sorting pile would still become workers in the economy in some way, now those at the bottom are just warehoused in prisons.

What makes this system of sorting cruel is two-fold. First, all people are worthy of a good standard of living but our economy makes that unattainable through the educational and economic sorting that produces extreme inequality. Secondly, the factors that largely determine this sorting are mostly distributed by forces beyond the individual’s control, such as the economic class of one’s parents, one’s race, one’s neighborhood, etc... This is another example of the needs of capitalists coming before the needs of members of society as human beings.

“Is all of this sorting really due to capitalism?” I would say yes, that sorting as it exists in schools is a uniquely capitalist function of the education system. All systems of oppression are essential collaborators in this process too whereby white supremacy and patriarchy do a lot of the dirty work. bell hooks characterizes dominant society as shaped by [white supremacist capitalist patriarchy](#) and that it’s impossible to really think of any one part without the others because they’re more like different sides of the same die than different objects altogether. When the terms “capitalism” or “white supremacy” appear in isolation, it’s to emphasize one side of the die in a particular context, but even then it’s better to think of each side as part of the whole. Stuart Hall captures some of the nature of these intertwined relationships with the line, “Race is the modality in which class is lived”.

Even if we lived in a nicer, gentler capitalism where inequality was less extreme, there would still need to be ways to sort workers into higher and lower paid jobs as well as into the broader and economically unequal categories of capitalists and bosses. If capitalism exists in any form, you have a class of people at the top who are fully invested in maintaining their class position and thus strengthening all the social systems that give them their power, prime among them the sorting done through the education system. The myth of the benevolent capitalist who takes their fair share and who gives the worker their fair share is dissolved by the material reality of opposing economic incentives. The myth of the benevolent school system as meritocracy is

dissolved by the crushing reality of sorting masses of people by race and class into poverty wages and prison cells. As long as society is divided between workers and capitalists who have fundamentally opposed interests (higher wages vs. higher profits), we'll see the education system serve the interests of those with more social power.

The second thing that makes a worker "good" is obedience. With all the pressures, indignities, and exploitation that many workers feel, the obedient worker is gold to the employer while the questioning worker who gets together with others to demand more is the employer's poison. Obedience is a product of many things, but the education system is certainly a major one. The hierarchical nature of the K12 education system where students are at the bottom and spend a significant part of their day just doing what they're told prepares workers to be at the bottom of the capitalist hierarchy as workers doing what they're told.

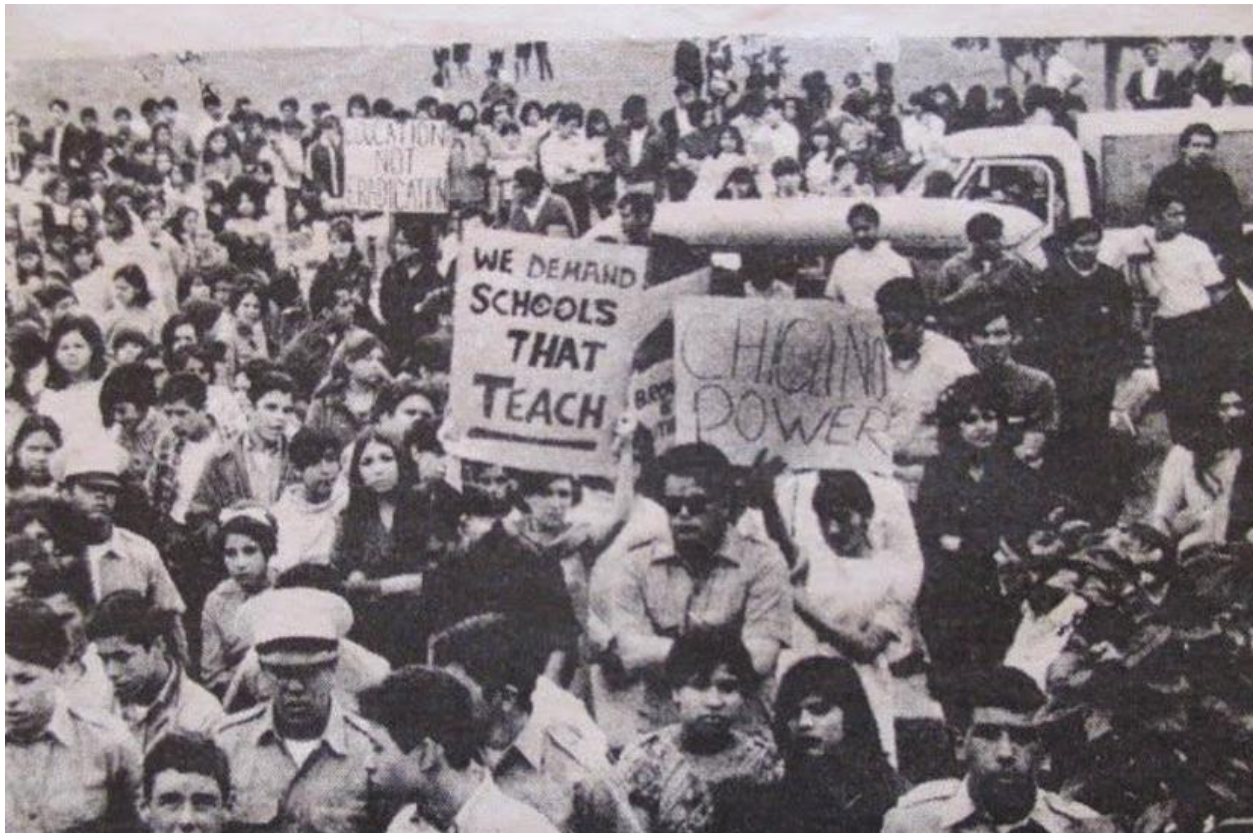
The idea that children are raw materials who are then sculpted by educators into commodities as "good" adult workers to maximize profits for employers should be disturbing to those who work in schools. That's not why we signed up to work in education. It's natural to object to this characterization of the education system because we feel complicit in it because we work in it. But there it is, and the further topics below should help fill out this picture more completely. I think recognizing this fact of our industry is central to finding ways to change it. If capitalists were to ever establish total control, this is approach to education would become all-encompassing.

But capitalists aren't all-powerful, and workers and students are humans with different needs and who have agency that they exercise daily in small and large ways. In different places and at different points in time, capitalists or workers may be in the favorable position of having more power to bend the education system to their priorities.

There are many ways that workers and students disrupt capitalist logic within the school system. Students, as the commodity going down the assembly line, can essentially muck up the gears and motors by refusing to participate in school and actively disrupting it through not doing schoolwork, talking in class, preventing other students from engaging, etc.... They are essentially sabotaging themselves as commodities, the way "bad" raw materials will lead to defective and unsellable commodities in a factory. Sadly, capitalism actually coopts this kind of student resistance through all the mechanisms of sorting that the student was resisting in the first place (see [Make Me!](#) by Toshalis for a more detailed account and theoretical analysis of this process). "Bad" and disruptive students become fast-tracked into the sorting process and whole systems of discipline and control in schools are designed to facilitate this pipeline that ends for many in the prison cell.

Student resistance becomes anti-capitalist and liberatory when it finds a way to meet human and social needs by resisting capitalism collectively instead of falling into its traps individually. Students have a complicated relationship to schools because they are not only commodities but are workers too in some ways. Even though they are not producing products for sale directly

and are not being paid for their work, they are expending effort (labor) by learning marketable skills (aka, turning themselves into commodities through their own labor). These marketable skills include everything from basic reading, writing, and math, which are often necessary skills for even the lowest-paid jobs in the US, to more “advanced” skills like calculus, computer programming, and team-building. Students can also muck up the gears of capitalism within schools by collectively withholding their labor as workers and making demands on authorities to bend the education system to their own needs instead of the needs of capitalism.



In 1968, 20,000 Chicano high school students engaged in walkouts against racist sorting and segregation in East Los Angeles schools. Student organizer Moctesuma Esparza said about the events, “The word started to circulate. ‘Walkout. Walkout. Let’s boycott school.’ And we slowly planned this out, campus by campus, over a six-month period and we set a date, March 6, 1968.” After the walkout on the first day was met with widespread police violence, Esparza recalled, “The next day we walked out again, and we walked out the next day after that, and we didn’t stop for two weeks.” 13 students were arrested, charged, and found guilty of felony conspiracy for “disturbing the peace” for their role in planning the student walkouts but were later exonerated in a higher court. In the end, some of the students’ demands were met, and the walkouts represented an escalation in the larger movement around education and racial justice in

Southern California. For more, see this [short video](#), this [article](#), and this [hour-long documentary](#).

In terms of long-term visions of education, students deserve to have much more say in their education than they're currently given. Whereas the needs of the individual and the needs of society have to be balanced whatever kind of economic system there is, that is very, very different from the education system under capitalism, where the needs of students are balanced (not very equally) with the needs of a small minority of capitalists who need workers to make profit from. In a non-capitalist society, students would have real decision-making power over their own learning, both individually in terms of the choices they have but also collectively in terms of students as a whole being a major part of the governance of the school system. In any free society, those who are impacted by an institution deserve to have some power over how that institution is run. Student liberation from capitalism is the self-transformation of students as commodities trained only to sell their labor into students as human beings whose full range of needs and capabilities are nurtured and explored.

The Workers: Educators

The waged workers in the education system are the educators. Like the factory worker, the educator is paid for the labor they perform on the commodities that are being produced. Like the factory worker, the educator doesn't have any ownership over the workplace and is subject to the oversight and management of bosses. Just like the factory worker whose job consists of connecting part A to part B hundreds of times an hour and who was trained to do so in a very specific way to maximize efficiency, so too the educator's work is being increasingly micromanaged by standardized tests and curriculums. Like the factory worker whose production lags even temporarily, the educator whose products don't meet the standards of quality control put forth by the bosses (aka test scores, which are often influenced by forces beyond the teacher's control like [poverty and homelessness](#)) are liable for increased surveillance, discipline, and even release. Like the factory worker whose production targets are inched up every year beyond what can reasonably be accomplished, so too are class sizes [bursting](#) at the seams all across the country.

Some educators who are lucky enough to earn higher wages often buy into the myth they're better than mere "workers" and see themselves as professionals who are somehow exempt from the problems that workers face. A teacher might think, "I make more money than other workers, my work is more skilled than other workers, I'm working with children and not with widgets, therefore I'm not a worker." While it's true that working with children is very different than working with widgets, we all have jobs because social needs compel production in certain industries. Working with kids doesn't make educators better than farmers, cooks, custodians, or brick layers, it just makes educators different. In all the ways one can look at the economic relationships in schools, educators are workers.

The myth that educators aren't workers is very convenient for the bosses in education. If you're not a worker and you thus don't care about the money and your own treatment and you only "care about the kids", then it's easier for the boss to cut your pay and benefits and erode your working conditions.

But who really counts as the "educators" in the schools? Here, a definition that's broad in some ways and narrow in others is helpful. The definition should contain all who work in the K12 education industry, including those who work directly with kids and those who don't. Many who aren't paid to work directly with students, like cafeteria workers and custodians, end up forming relationships with kids that are as important to their education as any other part. Even those who don't interact with students at all, like those who deliver the student meals to the schools each day, are best considered educators, because without them, how would kids eat and be able to learn at school? Those who have managerial powers, including especially the ability to discipline, hire, and fire other workers, should not be included in the "educators as workers" definition here, for reasons discussed in the next section.

Beyond the more immediately present goals of workers making a decent living and having decent working conditions, there are the questions of the roles that educators have in making the school system meet the needs of all those involved in education. What's often best for educators is also best for students, and vice versa. Seeing standardized testing both as an intensified form of sorting for students and a form of discipline and control of educators helps us envision what alternatives to such tests and curriculum might be and how they can push back against the aggressive sorting that reproduces social inequality.

This definition of the educator raises strategic questions as well. For example, a large obstacle to educators working together is not only the professional separations that exist in schools (teachers vs. assistants vs. cafeteria workers vs. office workers vs. etc.), but the obstacles to collaboration created by the mainstream labor movement by slicing up classes of workers into separate and often isolated unions and collective bargaining agreements. This is called "craft unionism" because workers organizations are separated from each other by their various crafts. In my school district, workers are separated into 15 separate craft unions, which doesn't include those excluded from unions altogether along craft lines, like substitute teachers.

If we define educators as all the workers in the K12 education system, then all the educators have the potential to disrupt the education system when they withhold their labor collectively by going on strike. In the 2018 statewide strike in West Virginia, for example, the bus drivers were at one point quicker to go on strike than the teachers and helped push other education workers into taking the action that they did. By uniting across job class, educators have more power together than separate and can win more for all. This is called "industrial unionism" because all the workers in the larger industry come together.

Baltimore school buildings are horribly under-maintained. At one school summer temps were recorded at 114 degrees in one of the classrooms and had freezing classrooms in the winter. The mainstream union wasn't much help because there's nothing about building conditions in the labor contract. Teachers decided to organize themselves. After one worker got a piece published in the Baltimore Sun about the conditions, the superintendent agreed to meet with a group of teachers about it. The super cancelled last-minute but sent four of his administrators in his place. The teachers came prepared and forcefully facilitated the meeting to maintain control of it. They had some teachers give personal testimony and then went straight into specific demands. The administrators were caught off guard, and the teachers followed the meeting up with barrages of emails. Shortly after, every heater in the school was fixed, which had never happened before despite a long history of individual complaints. As they say, direct action gets the goods.

In a school district in Minnesota, a principal can lobby to have their school designated as a "Community Partnership School" (CPS). While "community partnership" sounds nice, what it actually does is given principals more authority to change school policy and if test scores don't improve over three years it could be closed and reopened as a charter school. The principal announced at a staff meeting her intention to submit an application to the district to become a CPS assuming that people wouldn't know what that entailed and hoping it slid beneath the radar. The social leaders among the educators at the school knew what was happening and got large turnout to the school-wide union meeting the next day, where the details of CPS were explained and they came up with a plan to have a staff-wide vote on whether to endorse the CPS plan. The vote could not be legally binding, but if it failed it would make the principal's attempts to push it through look really bad, and the principal couldn't risk alienating her entire staff. The next day educators walked into the principal's office and told her of the plan to hold a staff vote on whether to support CPS. Knowing that the vote would clearly sink the plan, the principal started tearing up about how important CPS was. But the educators carried out the vote, 82% of staff voted against becoming CPS, and the school was the first in the district to stop a CPS designation.

Capitalism's Strategy against Workers: Divide and Conquer

"If the workers are many and the owners are few, why on earth do workers put up with this?" Capitalism's strategy is to divide workers from each other in order to weaken any potential unified force that would threaten the sovereignty of owners. This happens in many ways both within and through the education system.

One way this happens is through the sorting into different jobs. The worker who earns a little more than the one across the hallway (or across the street, town, state, country, or hemisphere) becomes invested in the system because they know they could be moved across the hallway themselves if they're not careful. The worker who earns a little less comes to see the one who makes a little more as the primary enemy. Meanwhile, those getting rich off the workers are enjoying their mansions and yachts. While this presentation is an oversimplification, the hyper-awareness of our economic positions in relation to those around us and knowing who is above and below us permeates every industry and every workplace. In subtle and not so subtle ways, this awareness is leveraged to make us believe that we are all in (not so) friendly competition with other workers and steers our attention away from underlying economic structures and the largely unseen owners. Sorting in the education system and its myth of meritocracy plays a central role in setting up these divisions between workers.

The other major way this happens is taking any differences that naturally exist between people and turning them into differences that justify some getting more and some getting less. White supremacy is in many ways about convincing poor white workers (and white workers of every income strata) that they're better and deserving of more than workers of color, and our white supremacist society backs up these inflated claims with more resources and opportunities for white people. It's not difficult to see how the focus on competition between workers noted above can be refracted through the lenses of white supremacy and patriarchy to reinforce relationships of privilege and marginalization in the economy. White workers and workers of color might have common interests against those who profit from their work, but while mainstream society is able to persuade white people that people of color are the problem, capitalism remains safe. The same is true of religion, gender, sexuality, ability, and so on. All of these forms of oppression provide the cultural beliefs ("white people are smarter", "women shouldn't work in STEM", etc...) that capitalism uses to underpay, exclude, and control marginalized groups. In a very unequal society, oppression is the lungs and capitalism is the heart.

Regarding the education system in particular, gender and race have been used to the great benefit of capitalism and detriment of workers. The teacher workforce is now [75% women](#), and this percentage has increased over the last 20 years. Studies have shown that occupations in which women hold a high majority of the positions [are paid less](#) compared to similarly skilled men-dominated professions. This perhaps helps explain the [lowering of teacher wages](#) compared to similarly-skilled jobs in other industries in recent decades. Reflecting a similar dynamic, the teacher workforce in New Orleans was easier for the capitalists to [fire entirely](#) in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina because the teachers were mostly black (and women). All the teachers had to re-apply for the jobs, which became non-union and without job protections at newly-opened charter schools, and many were replaced with white and temporary teachers from programs like Teach for America. Explained in broader terms, women (and the entire industries they have major representation in) and people of color are marginalized by dominant social norms which makes them easier for capitalism to underpay and discipline.

Fights against capitalism in education are also necessarily fights against white supremacy and patriarchy because of the way these systems interconnect. The silver bullet against capitalism's attempts to divide workers is to unify around the universal right people have to not be oppressed and exploited. That means unifying against white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism.

In education, [majority white teachers and teacher unions](#) have often been pitted against mostly people of color parents and community members, with unions being smeared for supposedly protecting bad teachers, for only caring about inflating teacher salaries, and for keeping educators of color out of the ranks. While there's always a degree of truth to each side of these conflicts that capitalism plays on to keep people divided, one great counterexample is how [Karen Lewis and the Chicago Teachers Union found ways to break through the impasse](#) by privileging parent and student concerns around class sizes and school closures in their communities and doing anti-racist work in the schools. While overcoming divisions and oppression always sounds easier than it actually is given how deeply ingrained social biases are, the challenge is ours to face.

The Bosses: Principals

In the factory, there's the overseer, the low-level manager, the shop-floor supervisor, or what-have-you, and in the school there's the principal. This is the immediate boss that oversees workers at the point of production: the workplace. The principal's tasks are many, including liaising with the higher-level administrators at the district, implementing and designing school policy, designing budgets, supporting teachers, etc... These are mostly tasks that other admin and school workers are sometimes involved in to varying degrees even though the principal often has final say.

However, among other things principals-as-bosses have two distinguishing features. The first one is that the boss, whether in the school or factory, has the authority to discipline workers. This gives them a degree of power in the workplace that no other person in the workplace has and creates an imbalance between bosses and workers.

As with formal authority of any role, it can be used responsibly or abusively. Under capitalism, principals are given the authority to have workers disciplined or fired. Sometimes principals act with integrity and remove workers for good reasons, such as they're harmful to children. Just as often, principals act to advance their own personal agenda by removing workers who ask too many questions about school policy, who object to poor working conditions or wages, or who they have petty disagreements with.

While the right has done a good job slandering the public image of union teachers as lazy and uncaring, the main thing teacher unions have done is require just cause for firing (as recent [lawsuits](#) have affirmed). Sure, bad teachers exist and are sometimes protected by unions, but the converse situation of good teachers being fired for bad reasons and bad teachers being

protected for bad reasons is a far more serious problem for education. The worst teacher I ever had as a student was buddy-buddy with the principal, and destroying unions or giving principals more authority would surely not have solved that problem.

Even in unionized workplaces where workers enjoy more protections, the principals can still fire probationary teachers on a whim (which is a 3-year period in my district), can rearrange budgets to lay off educators without going through due process, can out-manuever educators through complex grievance procedures, and can re-assign teachers to classrooms outside of their comfortable subject and age range or to understaffed classrooms with behavior challenges to wear them down and pressure them to quit. Even when the principal does have to go head to head with the union, they usually have the full weight of the district on their side, including its legal team, HR department, media liaisons, and relatively deep pockets. To object to the role of bosses under capitalism is to object to the unilateral authority of one person in a workplace to be able to fire and discipline any of the others.

The second distinguishing feature of the boss is that their job is to maximize certain outcomes in the workplace by taking orders from above and enforcing them on the workers below them. In the private sector, higher profit is usually the outcome which shareholders hire executives, who then hire other managers, to carry out. This maximizing of particular outcomes combined with the power to unilaterally discipline workers is what makes a boss a boss.

In the school system, outcomes are not necessarily tied to any one metric, but the spread of standardized testing has led to higher test scores being the main target outcomes that principals organize production around. This is a huge attack on the human needs of students, whose own needs and desires often don't fit into bubbles on standardized tests which their education experience is constructed around. A watershed moment for the intensification of testing was George W Bush's [No Child Left Behind Act](#), which tied federal funding for states to [mandatory standardized testing](#) and punishes repeated bad test scores with turning schools into charters or closing them entirely. Then [Obama's Race to the Top policy](#) incentivized states to compete with each other for large grants over who could show commitment to [basing teacher pay on test scores and use testing outcomes to "turn around" schools](#). While federal funding for education comprises less than 10% of total education dollars, it greatly influences state and local education policy. All of this focus on testing and evidence-based policy is ironic considering there's [little evidence that increased standardized testing improves education outcomes](#).

Testing regimes coerce teachers into focusing much more on the measurable outcomes of some areas (math, reading, and writing) at the expense of a more holistic vision of human abilities and experiences. Some centrally important but mostly untested domains include emotional skills, creative thinking, interpersonal skills, art, music, physical education, self-reflection, and so on. The backlash against current standardized testing practices does not favor designing "better" tests so that every aspect of being a kid can be properly measured, assessed, and sorted. Much like human needs of workers in the private sector shouldn't be wholly subservient to the profit-motives of investors, so too data should be subservient to

human needs instead of making human needs subservient to data in the form of high-stakes tests.

A central way to attack capitalism in any workplace is to build worker organization that can take action to force changes in the workplace. This takes decision-making away from the unilateral authority of the boss and at its best democratizes our working lives. In schools, an organized workplace might look like one where teachers feel empowered by each other to design and teach the curriculum they think best instead of the one being pushed by the district to maximize test scores; one where the principal is afraid to implement any new policy before getting approval from the committee of educators at the school who do all the work and hold the real power; one where students and educators together can co-determine how best to meet their intertwined human needs. Ultimately, the end goal is to get rid of bosses and principals entirely, but this goal can be reached incrementally through gradually building worker power by taking direct action.

While many of the worst things that happen in capitalist education happen under the reign of [bullying and abusive bosses](#), a frequent objection I hear to an anti-capitalist approach to labor organizing is the “problem” where a workplace has a nice and supportive boss. This is especially prominent in schools, where, just like teachers, many principals get in the business to “help the kids”. This creates cognitive dissonance because then it’s hard to match the image of the principal as the bad guy with your everyday experience of your principal doing good work. Those who have supportive principals can be happy that they don’t have abusive ones, and there’s no use in trying to make up reasons for why you think your principal is really mean in the inside.

The point about analyzing social systems, such as capitalism, and not just individuals is so that we’re able to see the forest and not merely the trees. Systems can have overall dynamics and be governed by rules and pressures that aren’t apparent from looking at isolated cases. The problem with capitalism isn’t that all the bosses are mean, but that capitalism structures our social relationships in such a way that some have power and control over others and that this produces an extremely unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. The nicest principal in the world still has a full arsenal of disciplinary weapons at their disposal that they can use against workers *when* they so choose. The arsenal of the individual worker to resist discipline and hold a principal accountable is extremely restricted. This is the power relationship between bosses and workers that exists regardless of personality, and is why collective action by workers and collective organization in the form of unions are necessary to counter the principal’s authority.

How do you organize against a nice principal? The key is to maintain focus on collective action and to emphasize the structural issues in the workplace over individual features of a boss’s personality. This might look like getting a bunch of coworkers to ask the nice principal for something. You don’t

have to be aggressive about your ask if that doesn't seem strategic. If the principal says "yes", then great, it's a victory for workers! In the debrief of the action, highlight that it was the workers asking that got the problem solved and not the principal's personality. You can keep building with your coworkers by asking for something a little more each time. Eventually, the principal is bound to say "no" either because they don't want to give in or because they don't have the authority to give in. At that point it turns into a more traditional worker-boss conflict. Of course, organizing isn't as simple as all this, but this is a rough sketch of one way to approach organizing under a nice boss.

Upper Management: The Politicians

Whereas principals are the school-level bosses, the bosses that formally sit atop the education system and who hold formal power of high-level decision-making are politicians. Locally elected and appointed school boards, state legislatures, and the federal government all play important roles in decision-making in the education system. This layer of the structure of the education system is one with no immediately obvious analog in factory production, but a closer look reveals that the role of upper management as higher-level decision-makers in corporations matches fairly well with the role of politicians as higher-level decision-makers in public education. One might think that because politicians are democratically elected that maybe capitalism and oppression don't exist in the education system.

While it's often presented that way, elected politicians, by themselves, do virtually nothing to blunt the effects of capitalism within education. While a full-fledged argument about why voting in US elections is not the pinnacle of democracy is beyond the scope of this piece, here I'll briefly highlight a couple critiques.

Whereas federal elections have middling degrees of voter participation (varying from 50 - 60% in recent decades), voter turnout in state and municipal elections often amounts to half that. Those who do vote tend to be those with the time and proper access to information, which generally excludes the most impoverished and high needs populations. The disparities in voting populations mirrors the disparities in who benefits and who doesn't within capitalist education.

If access to information is the problem, one might think that that can be solved through voter education and encouragement. That can have an effect, but a major factor in politicians being able to run successful campaigns is the funding they have access to. Usually the candidate themselves needs enough independent wealth or income to devote resources to be able to devote their personal time to campaigning, which is one filter on the social position and politics of those who run for office. The other major filter is if candidates can attract the funding of rich donors and endorsements of big players that are needed increasingly for even local campaigns.

For example, in my district of Minneapolis Public Schools in recent years outstate billionaires have [funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars](#) into school board races to effectively buy board seats for their preferred candidates. If anything clearly articulates the influence of the rich on the education system, it's this. In state and national elections, fundraising plays an even more fundamental role and is an effective shield against [popular proposals like increasing education funding](#). The general leftist critique is that as long as electoral politics is susceptible to influence from the rich in a society with extreme inequality, the politicians will remain the managers while the rich are the owners. Society as a whole imitates the factory.

While local elections are occasionally places where bottom-up forces can assert themselves, the local politicians that run school districts usually function as just another layer of management. The proof is in the pudding. School boards are the ones who hire superintendents, and the supers are the ones who negotiate labor contracts. Just like in the private sector, contract negotiations are fierce battles over resources with the bosses trying to pay the workers less and the workers trying to get more. If society and the school system were remotely "democratic" and wanted education funding to keep pace with other social priorities, educator wages would keep up with GDP or at least inflation. Instead, wages for educators have been hacked at for decades with wages and benefits for teachers vs. wages and benefits for comparable jobs in other industries [falling 11% in 20 years](#). In more than half of US states, teachers make below a ["living wage" as defined by MIT researchers](#), and in 35 states teachers with 10 years of experience and a family of four [qualify for multiple kinds of public assistance](#). Wages for my current position as an education assistant have been, accounting for inflation, pushed down 20% by bosses and politicians in the last 17 years. All of these attacks on educator wages severely damage student learning by contributing to [widespread staff shortages](#) and [high turnover](#).

In 2012, the Chicago Teacher Union (CTU), the third largest educator union in the country with 27,000 members, went on strike. Unlike in many other big school districts, the school board in Chicago is not elected but is appointed directly by the mayor, who was and still is Rahm Emanuel, Obama's former Chief of Staff. Just as Obama bailed out the big banks but neglected homeowners and workers with his economic initiatives, so Emanuel is close with the business interests of Chicago and helped push school reforms whose functions have been to weaken the teacher union, close "failing" schools, and double down on test scores. In the decade leading up to the strike, 70 schools were closed, many replaced by charter schools, and 6,000 union teacher positions evaporated. A group called the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators within CTU took over the leadership positions in the union in 2010 and started building from day one to a strike by creating a strong base of leaders in each school. When Emanuel was elected mayor of Chicago in 2011 while at the same time being given new powers over the school district by the state legislature, his first move was to cancel a 4% raise guaranteed in the existing teacher contract. More than any other educator strike in recent memory, the CTU strike was essentially one of the workers against a singular politician. The teachers' demands in contract negotiations focused as much on teacher issues as on student issues including guaranteed pre-K, access to less-tested subjects

like art, music, and physical education, and smaller class sizes. The strike lasted from Sept. 10th - 18th, and on the first day 35,000 teachers and allies marched and rallied in downtown Chicago, closing not only the schools but the main business center of the state. When a contract was reached, it was declared a victory by the union because it successfully fended off the worst of Emanuel's reforms but it also didn't manage to win major gains either. However, the result is more sympathetic when seen in the light of an economy in the midst of a deep recession, and as the first major teacher strike in decades, it helped educators on the national stage break out of complacency and laid the groundwork for militant teacher strikes in the rest of the decade. Any misconception the residents of Chicago had about their highest elected official working for their interests in a democracy regarding education were shattered and his true colors were revealed. As the years following the strike have seen more aggressive attacks by Emanuel on Chicago schools and CTU's continued resistance, one [Chicago Tribune](#) headline read, "Teachers union has triple the public support of Emanuel" regarding education policy. For more information, check out [How to Jump-Start Your Union: Lessons from the Chicago Teachers](#) and this [article](#).

The Capitalists: The Rich

In the factory, there's the rich person who owns the factory or, with today's stock markets, the shareholders who own the company. The owners seek to maximize the return on their investment by hiring a CEO to run the company (I use "owners" instead of "capitalists" often because the latter feels jargony and old-timey and is less obvious to someone new to leftist politics). The CEO's implicit job description is to "Maximize profit", and this is [enshrined in and enforced by corporate law](#). If the CEO doesn't do a good job maximizing profits compared to other industry competitors, the CEO will likely be fired by the shareholders and replaced by a different CEO who will. The company owners don't do the work of the company themselves and instead hire the executive to hire and manage the workers of the company to do the work.

The way to determine if your industry is structured by capitalist logic is to ask if anyone benefits financially from pushing down labor costs. In the private sector, it's the shareholders who benefit financially from keeping wages and salaries as low as possible. In the public sector, rich taxpayers are the ones who financially benefit from gouging the wages and benefits of educators because tax burdens fall disproportionately on those with wealth and labor costs are a primary expense of public sector industries like education.

How this plays out within the school system is a variation on the main capitalist theme. There is no direct owner of the public K12 school system in the same way a rich person has a legal document entitling them to an ownership portion of a company. But just as private investors provide the money that pays for the capital (buildings, machinery, loans) and pays for the wages used in the private sector, so mostly wealthy taxpayers, through the government as an intermediary, provide the money that pays for capital (buildings, curriculum, information technology) and pays for wages in the public sector. In effect, rich taxpayers stand in the same

relation to schools as shareholders stand in relation to the company: one of minimizing costs, especially from labor, and, where possible, maximizing returns.

Just as the rich hire CEOs to minimize costs in order to maximize their profits in the private sector, so do they hire professionals to minimize their costs via taxes in the public sector. For example, they hire accountants to find every tax loophole (like [offshore tax havens](#)), hire lobbyists to [push down taxes](#), fund political campaigns of politicians who have friendly tax proposals and who want to cut social spending. Driving down their tax commitments is the most direct way that the rich maintain their wealth, which subsequently starves public services of resources.

While there's a carefully crafted image of the rich as your "ah shucks" neighbors who want to make an honest living and contribute to a good society, actual studies of the opinions and [political spending](#) of the rich reveals an extreme and aggressive agenda bent on slashing taxes and undermining public services like education. To take just one example of the effects of efforts to lower taxes for the rich, from 1995 to 2007 the [effective tax rate for the top 400 taxpayers in the US them went from 30% to 16%](#) due in large part to Clinton and Bush incrementally lowering the capital gains tax til it hit 15% in 2003. This change in taxes for the rich amounts to *each* of the richest taxpayers saving an average of \$46 million *each* year compared to a decade earlier. Put another way, as a society we're giving each of the richest 400 people \$46 million a year instead of spending it on public goods like education. The [capital gains tax rate](#) inched back up to 20% in 2013, but this has likely been overcompensated for by the fact that the wealthiest Americans have [captured so much of the wealth](#) created since the Great Recession. The capital gains tax is still far below what it was in 1995 (25%) and the 1970s (35%). Beyond capital gains taxes, the [income tax rates for the wealthy](#) in the US have plummeted from 90% in the 1950s to 40% today. All in all, the rich have been extremely successful in driving down their tax commitments in opposition to [overwhelming public support for higher taxes](#) on the richest Americans.

The opinions and actions of economic elites relating to education policy in particular is just as troubling. A poll of public opinion of the [richest 1% vs the general population](#) on public policy issues found that only 35% of the rich agreed with the following statement while 87% of the general population did: "The federal government should spend whatever is necessary to ensure that all children have really good public schools they can go to." Revealingly, this was tied for the widest opinion gap between the rich and everyone else across the 18 issues polled. This is particularly disturbing in light of findings from a [major study](#) of thousands of poll results and their influence on federal policy: "economic elites and organized interest groups play a substantial part in affecting public policy, but the general public has little or no independent influence."

Additionally, corporations are aggressively seeking ways to [insert for-profit companies](#) into public education through [standardized tests](#), [textbooks](#), subcontracting of busing and food services, those [charter schools that are for-profit](#), and [for-profit property companies](#) that rent to non-profit charters. As billionaire conservative investor Rupert Murdoch [said](#), "When it comes to

K through 12 education, we see a \$500 billion sector in the US alone that is waiting desperately to be transformed” in reference to investing in companies that can take a piece of that pie. While these efforts are particularly exploitative and should be resisted, we shouldn’t let them distract from the larger fact that public education as it exists normally is still essentially capitalist in its structure. As long as capitalism is the dominant economic system and the rich hold the vast majority of the political and economic power, public education will be subordinate to capitalist logic.

As attacks against organized labor have pushed private sector union density from 35% in the 1950s to below 7% today, one of the last bastions of working class institutional power are public sector unions. In the efforts of rich interests to push down labor costs across the economy, they have now strategically singled out public unions to decrease their tax burdens and additionally because destroying unions and pushing down labor costs in one sector [creates downward wage pressures](#) on the rest of the economy. This anti-teacher union assault by billionaires has increased in intensity over the last couple decades with the rise of non-union charter schools (funded by Walmart fortune heirs alone to the tune of [\\$355 million](#) and with [plans for \\$1 billion more](#)); alternative teacher-licensure programs like [TFA that essentially turns teaching into a low-paid, post-college internship](#) (despite most of TFA’s money coming from public sources it has accumulated [\\$100s of millions in surplus](#) above its operating costs on the backs of low-paid teachers and in states with financially struggling school districts); Right-to-Work laws where members can opt out of unions in otherwise unionized workplaces (funded by a [slew of billionaires led by the Koch brothers](#)); and now the Janus lawsuit decision which institutes those laws at the federal level (billionaires, including immediate family members of current Dept of Education head Betsy DeVos, are now [funding aggressive post-Janus de-unionization campaigns](#)). Amid all of this teacher unions have been on the ropes, dropping from [64% density in 1984 to 49% today](#).

What then are educators to do? If we can’t fight against direct shareholders like we can in the private sector, do we have no options for advancing worker struggle? Luckily, most of the same strategies and tactics the factory worker uses against direct owners can be tweaked and applied to the school worker against indirect owners. For example, the strikes in West Virginia were as much against the state’s political establishment as they were against the economic elites (that the WV governor is a billionaire tips off how close those two establishments are).

In West Virginia, public education had been suffering from severe malnutrition due to a decades long attack by both Democrats and Republicans against school funding and educator unions. Teachers in West Virginia were ranked 48th in the country in wages. The spark that lit the strike came from proposed legislation that would increase the health insurance co-pay by 20% while raising wages so little that it amounted to a wage cut amid annual inflation. Organizing started out 8 months prior and culminated in a strike that lasted from February 22nd to March 6th of 2018 and included all 55 counties in the state. 20,000 teachers went on strike as did 13,000

other school employees, making it among the largest labor actions in recent decades. The state's billionaire governor tried to talk teachers down from the strike and scolded them with lines like, "You should be appreciative of where you are". At one point, school bus drivers were the ones in front forcing the work stoppages and bringing along other workers into the strike. Teachers won a 5% raise and killed parts of the legislation that were most egregious (and went on strike again this last February [to kill a retaliatory bill](#) targeting educators). These actions inspired similar mass educator strikes in Oklahoma, Arizona, and Kentucky in 2018. All together, the more than 300,000 teachers across the country [who went on strike in 2018](#) was more than the combined numbers of teachers who struck in the previous 25 years. Expanding into blue state territory in 2019, teacher strikes have been successfully pulled off in Los Angeles, Denver, and Oakland. For more information about West Virginia, [see these articles](#).

Conclusion

While public education holds a special place in the liberal imagination as a great equalizer, it is more often a place of exploitation and oppression. Strife and conflict abound over who will be sorted into the corporate board room and who will be sorted into low-waged jobs and prison cells. Who will be fired and who will be lucky enough stay around to see their pay cut year after year? The major portion of the working and learning lives of teachers and students are governed by bosses who are more accountable to standardized tests than meeting human needs. We should reject the liberal reverence for public education and see our schools for what they are: sites of class struggle over what kind of society we want live in.

In this view of public education there is great potential. As educators and students, we are uniquely placed to affect change in the schools and, by extension, society as a whole. As one of the industries that is least susceptible to automation and outsourcing, it also strategically positioned within the labor movement. Our aspirations should be further elevated by the political moment we're living in, one where teachers are leading strike waves across the country and enjoying broad [public support](#). Similarly, the role of youth in leading social movements like Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street points towards the collective power of youth in challenging the status quo, which is nowhere as contested as in the schools youth attend.

With educator-led actions popping off all around us, we still shouldn't neglect taking the time to inquire about the root problems in society and in the education system. Without a political analysis to root our struggle, we're likely to blow with the capricious political winds and then fall scattered to the ground after things die down. We're caught up in an economic struggle forced on us by capitalism, and there's no better time to firmly choose a side.

The commitments that students and teachers have to making social change are reflected in the commitments they have to each other. The relationship between the teacher and student is at the core of the education system, and yet it is one enveloped in fraught class relations. It is also one where we can discover our humanity and fight for it with each other.

Economic Category	Factory Production	Schools
Commodity	Material goods	Obedient and variously skilled workers
Worker	Assembly line worker	Educators
Workplace boss	Supervisor	Principal
Upper management	Executives	Politicians
Capitalist	Shareholders	Rich taxpayers
Production goal	Maximize profit and minimize labor costs	Raise test scores and minimize labor costs