What Trump’s Cabinet picks tell us

Randi Weingarten, President
American Federation of Teachers

Donald Trump feuded with the Republican establishment during his presidential campaign, but as president-elect he is mending fences with them, larding his cabinet with billionaires, fans of trickle-down economics, and anti-government, anti-science ideologues. Climate change deniers? Check. Proponents of dismantling public education? Check. Advocates for privatization, lowering taxes for the have-haves, and keeping the minimum wage low for the have-nots? Check, check and check. I almost wonder if it would be better not to have these agencies than to have people running them who want to turn them against their own missions.

Americans did not vote for what is emerging to be a dangerous, extremist agenda.

Trump voters responded to his mantra of jobs, jobs, and his pledge to help the little guy and stick it to elites. But that doesn’t square with his nomination of business executive Andrew Puzder to serve as secretary of labor. Puzder has shipped jobs overseas, promoted replacing workers with robots and fought increases to the minimum wage for low-wage workers like those at the fast-food restaurants his company owns. His company was fined for wage theft and required to pay back pay to workers after an investigation by the very department he may lead. You don’t make America great by trampling workers’ right to earn a living.

Trump’s nomination of U.S. Rep. Tom Price (R-Ga.) to head the Department of Health and Human Services shows that he intends to strip access to healthcare for millions of Americans, including 8 million children. That’s what ending the Affordable Care Act and the Children’s Health Insurance Program would mean, if Price gets his way. Price also wants to privatize Medicare by giving seniors a voucher with which to try to buy health insurance, turning the right to healthcare that our seniors now have into a commodity.

Betsy DeVos, Trump’s choice to serve as education secretary, has a long record of being anti-public education, a fact that should disqualify her from consideration. She has used her extraordinary wealth to destabilize and defund public schools, while promoting failed private school vouchers and unaccountable for-profit charter schools that have benefited their owners far more than the children they are supposed to serve. DeVos and her family have poured money into anti-gay causes such as so-called conversion therapy. And they have linked school choice to “greater kingdom gain,” coded language for using public funds to support making Christianity—not public schools—the center of communities, something our founders, in the First Amendment’s separation of church and state, zealously guarded against.

Largely as a result of her efforts, Michigan—where DeVos focused her attacks on public education—tolerates more low-performing charter schools than just about any other state in the country. About 80 percent of Michigan’s charter schools are for-profit—more than any other state. And 67 percent of Michigan charter schools performed worse than neighborhood public schools on the Nation’s Report Card, a test administered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. It’s all about money and ideology, not kids or the quality of education. How does that make America great for the 90 percent of students who attend public schools?

Wilbur Ross, Trump’s choice to serve as secretary of commerce, has been called a vulture investor for his practice of extracting profits from troubled companies by slashing jobs, squeezing unions and gutting pensions. Steven Mnuchin, tapped to head the Treasury Department, made a fortune for his practice of extracting profits from troubled companies by slashing jobs, squeezing unions and gutting pensions. Steven Mnuchin, tapped to head the Treasury Department, made a fortune by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. It’s all about money and ideology, not kids or the quality of education. How does that make America great for the 90 percent of students who attend public schools?

It doesn’t make America great to undermine public education, undercut workers, restrict access to healthcare or pit people against each other.

FOLLOW AFT PRESIDENT RANDI WEINGARTEN: twitter.com/rweingarten