

Mayor Giuliani's budget targets New York City teachers, public employees

Alan Whyte
7 February 2000

Republican Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani announced a budget plan for New York City that calls for merit pay instead of base pay increases. While this wage plan, one part of the mayor's overall budget for fiscal year 2001, was especially aimed at the teachers, it would also apply to the rest of the city's workforce.

Most of the city's 300,000 municipal employees will be negotiating new contracts this year. In 1995 the municipal employees' unions accepted a two-year wage freeze to help Giuliani balance the city budget. Officials from the largest city workers union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) District Council 37, representing 124,000 workers, only managed to get the contract ratified by stuffing the ballot boxes with yes votes. Most of the city union leaders then endorsed the Republican mayor for reelection.

The mayor devoted a large part of his budget speech last week to condemning the public school system and its teachers. His plan would establish a four-tier structure of salary hikes, starting at 6 percent for teachers judged to be the best by superiors, to no raises for those who receive bad ratings. The plan would also make it easier to fire teachers that have been evaluated as "incompetent." Throughout the country there has been a growing trend towards using so-called merit pay to supplement regularly scheduled pay increases. In Giuliani's case, however, merit pay will replace wage increases.

"The city will not agree to single percentage pay increase; that era is over," the mayor said. "Let's really put the kids first and let the pay get determined by the performance with the children rather than a job protection system." The mayor hailed the recent elimination of tenure rights for school principals—a measure he had insisted be part of their recent contract—as the kind of changes that he was demanding in the upcoming negotiations.

In addition to blaming teachers for the poor

performance of students, Giuliani has continued with his attacks on public education as a whole. As part of this, he has proposed setting aside \$6 million for vouchers to parents to send their children to private or parochial schools. He has also called upon the Board of Education to sell its headquarters, and cut its administrative staff by 75 percent.

Spending for New York City schools is \$4,000 less per pupil than in the suburbs and teacher salaries are also 20 to 30 percent lower. As a result the city has an acute teacher shortage, estimated to be as high as 54,000 instructors, according to the Board of Education. In addition to the need for qualified teachers to reduce overcrowded classrooms, the public school system is in desperate need of funds to construct new schools and repair old buildings, as well as for supplies and up-to-date technology. A recent statewide test showed the predictable correlation between funding for education and test scores, something that the mayor, in the process of pushing his right-wing agenda, has denied.

The mayor's merit pay proposal takes this agenda even further. Teachers' living standards will be held hostage to the arbitrary decisions of principals and other superiors, who can punish outspoken and critical teachers by canceling their pay raises. Moreover, educators will be driven to compete against each other for pay and to focus exclusively on improving test results.

Despite this, Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers, as well as a number of other union leaders, have indicated that they would accept the merit concept if it were tied to a basic wage increase. City Council President Peter F. Vallone, one of the most important Democratic Party officials aligned with the union bureaucracy, has also indicated that he is not opposed, in principle, to tying salary increases to performance evaluations.

In addition to the public schools, the mayor's budget

will continue to slash funding for other educational resources. Giuliani is seeking to cut \$41 million from the libraries, \$19 million from museums and other cultural institutions and \$14.5 million from youth programs. These cuts are being proposed with a municipal budget that contains a \$2.2-billion surplus. Overall, Mayor Giuliani says that his proposed \$36.8 billion budget reduces spending by 1 percent.

Based on this surplus, the mayor has also called for a 16 percent reduction in business and personal income taxes, totaling \$2 billion over the next four years. These tax cuts will benefit those who are financially best off, while the denying the 100,000 people with the lowest income any tax break at all. Some analysts have also warned that the tax cutting plan will increase a projected municipal operating deficit for 2003 from \$1.7 billion to \$2.7 billion, necessitating further budget cuts in city services.

The mayor also requested that the State of New York allow the city to increase its debt by billions of dollars, in order to pay for critically needed infrastructure repairs for bridges, schools, hospitals and even ferry terminals. In 1999 the city dedicated 16 percent of its budget to pay off its debts, an increase from 11 percent in 1990. With the tax cuts, the new borrowing could force the city, in four years, to spend 20 percent of its budget to pay debts.

A number of media commentators have pointed to the fact that Giuliani's budget proposals, and particularly its call for merit pay and more tax cuts, are aimed at rallying Republican and Conservative supporters behind the mayor's upcoming campaign for the US Senate. This is undoubtedly true. More fundamentally, however, the budget is an indication of the type of attacks on the working class that Wall Street wants implemented, whether a Democrat or Republican occupies City Hall.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact