Governor's budget results in layoff notices for thousands of California teachers

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Close to 20,000 teachers, administrators and other workers in California's public schools received layoff notices March 15 in the wake of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposed 2008-2009 budget, which would cut around $4.8 billion from the state's education spending.

In launching this massive attack, the state government in Sacramento has made it clear that working people—teachers and others employed in public education, as well as parents and children who attend public schools—will be made to pay the price for California's fiscal crisis.

School districts throughout the state are scrambling for ways to deal with the anticipated staff deficits and funding cuts. The Long Beach Unified School District plans to close an elementary school, transferring students to another school four miles away. San Francisco will dip into a "rainy day fund" to the tune of $30 million. The superintendent of schools in the northern California Healdsburg Unified School District suggested that senior teachers take early retirement.

In school districts all over California, school boards are considering a number of options, including school closures, termination of after-school and special programs, increased class sizes, hiring freezes, pay cuts and layoff notices, not only for teachers but for administrators, custodians, bus drivers, counselors, nurses, librarians and other support personnel.

California law requires that school employees be notified by March 15 of Reduction in Force (RIF) layoffs that might occur at the end of the school year. In the recent past, the worst instance of RIF notices occurred in 2003 during the administration of Democratic governor Gray Davis when more than 20,000 teachers also received pink slips. Under pressure from citizen protests, rallies and letters, Davis revised the budget to provide more education funding, though close to 3,000 teachers still found themselves without jobs by the beginning of the following school year.

The current layoff slips—and the fear of receiving them—have angered the state's teachers. A March 14 *San Francisco Chronicle* article, for example, cites the comment of elementary school teacher Kristen Vogel: "I think more than anything, it's insulting. I worked so hard this year and before that preparing to be a teacher. I specifically wanted to work with at-risk students in an urban area." Ms. Vogel is married to a fourth grade teacher in Santa Rosa. They both fear that they will be out of work next school year. They recently bid on a house in Petaluma, but now do not know whether they should proceed with the purchase given the likelihood that they will be laid off.

Recently, hundreds of students in Alameda Unified School District walked out of classes to protest the proposed elimination of high school sports programs. In Monterey County, about 200 teachers, parents and students held a demonstration against the layoffs. In Modesto, a school board meeting had to be rescheduled because the crowd grew too large for the capacity of the room, prompting the fire department to raise safety concerns.

This month's school board meeting in San Diego, which voted to issue pink slips to nearly 1 in 10 educators in their district, attracted a standing-room-only crowd of hundreds of angry parents, students, and employees. They held up signs calling on the school district to resist, not accommodate, the cuts. The only trustee who voted against the pink slips was applauded.

The education cuts are part of a 10 percent across-the-board budget reduction that Schwarzenegger is demanding for this fiscal year, which will affect almost every state agency and target myriad public health programs, the University of California and California State University systems, libraries, parks and recreation and so forth. A number of articles have appeared recently spelling out the risks that the budget cuts pose to efforts to curb rising tuberculosis rates in the state.

Schwarzenegger has ruled out any possibility of raising taxes, particularly those that target the wealthy and corporations, to address the massive budget shortfall.

The current situation is only the most recent stage in what has been an ongoing assault on public education in California. By 2000, the state had dropped from first in the nation in important educational indicators to forty-seventh. As well, the worsening of conditions and stagnating salaries have caused many teachers to flee the state.

California's current budget travails, especially in regard to school funding, predate the Schwarzenegger administration and extend back well into the tenure of his Democratic predecessor, Gray Davis. The bursting of the dot-com bubble of the late 1990s brought on a relatively mild, yet prolonged recession. In addition the state hasn't yet recovered from the loss of more than $30 billion as a result of the energy crisis of 2000-2001, when energy companies—most notably Enron—manipulated the energy supply market through a variety of fraudulent schemes.

Recent economic developments have only worsened the situation. The state's economy accounts for 13 percent of US economic output and is home to 12 percent of the nation's population. The housing, employment and credit crises have had a devastating effect on the state's economy. Unemployment has steadily risen, and home foreclosure rates are among the highest in the nation.

In the face of this, the California governor has made it clear that he is determined to continue the agenda his corporate backers expect of him, which is to place the full burden of the economic and fiscal crisis in the state on the backs of working people. Schwarzenegger, who came into office as the result of the anti-democratic and corporate-funded 2003 recall campaign against Davis, galvanized popular support by trumpeting his supposed concern for kids and public education.

The reaction of the California Teachers Association (CTA) and its affiliated local unions to the massive cuts has been predictably pathetic and impotent. The CTA bemoans the projected cuts, offers legal and procedural information and urges Californians to contact the governor and their representatives. A 60-second radio advertisement has been taken out that features a teacher commenting on the hardship the planned cuts will create. None of this will do anything.

The inability and unwillingness of the CTA to lead the mass opposition that exists within the population to Schwarzenegger's cuts is not

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unexpected. In 2004, when the state's ongoing budget crisis resulted in the governor's carrying out massive budget cuts and rescinding significant amounts of funding for the state's schools, the CTA accepted the rollbacks as a necessary evil. Although this was in violation of a state law, the teachers' union leaders told their membership that they had been promised additional funding in subsequent years to make up for that year's cuts. This money never materialized.

The CTA is unable to launch a genuine struggle in defense of California's teachers and public education as a whole because of its defense of the profit system and its political ties to the Democratic Party, which is the majority party in the state legislature and has enabled Schwarzenegger to carry out his draconian measures.

On its Web site, the California Democratic Caucus claimed that "legislative Democrats have already reluctantly backed $7.5 billion in spending cuts, deferments, and other cost controls to valued state services, including Medi-Cal and Supplemental Security Income." The Web site then noted, however, that the "Assembly Republicans recently rejected a bill that would close a yacht tax loophole, enabling the owners of yachts to avoid paying sales taxes on their boats if the vessel is kept offshore for three months. All legislative Democrats supported that proposal."

This is an empty stunt. According to a March 5 editorial in the *Los Angeles Times*, "eliminating that tax break would generate only $26 million for a state budget that is projected to be at least $16 billion out of balance."

On March 12, Democratic Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez proposed additional taxes on oil companies as a way to raise $1.2 billion a year for education. He proposed a 6 percent tax on the oil that petroleum companies extract in the state as well as a 2 percent tax on windfall oil profits. California is the third-largest oil-producing state and the only one that does not collect an oil-extraction fee. In 21 other states, oil companies pay billions of dollars in drilling fees.

The additional revenue, Nunez said, would partially offset the $4.8 billion in education cuts proposed by the governor. During the debate, Assemblyman Charles Calderon, D-Whittier, played the demagogue: "We have to decide whether or not we want a California that offers quality education for our children, or whether or not we want a California that offers oil companies a free ride."

The whole business was another publicity stunt since Republicans in the state Assembly promptly blocked the proposal, as the Democrats knew they would. Nobody expected the measure to pass because tax increases require a two-thirds vote in the Legislature, meaning that at least six Republicans in the Assembly would have had to support Nunez's plan. After three hours of debate and 42 speeches by lawmakers, the measure failed along a 45-30 party-line vote.

The WSWS spoke with Joe Sabet, who has been working as a long-term substitute special education teacher for over a year at the School of Extended Educational Options (SEEO) in Pomona, California, a Los Angeles suburb.

As he explained to the WSWS, the SEEO "functions as an independent study program, where students can come to school twice a week, for as little as 2 hours per week. Each class is 2 hours a week. The program is designed so students can take one or a few classes at a time, but finish them in 4-8 weeks. This school just opened in August, and it's kind of a 'pet project'—as I always hear—of the superintendent of PUSD [Pomona Unified School District].

"I work with 8 students at SEEO, individually," explained Sabet. "They have mild-moderate disabilities, mainly specific learning disabilities (problems processing auditory information, keeping attention, etc.). I don't have an aide. I also go every day to another site for 1-2 hours to work with one student. The school [PAS—Pomona Alternative School] has adult students and secondary students expelled from various schools. My student there requires special education services and I work one-on-one with him.

"The students are mainly Hispanic. The socioeconomic status of the students and Pomona area is lower to middle level. We currently have a little over 200 students. Lunches are not provided because of the school's status as an independent study program. Some of the reasons the students come here: they work a significant amount of time, have babies, gang issues at other schools, and they may be uninterested in school and want to come as little as possible," he said.

We asked Sabet how he and other teachers were being affected by the expected layoffs. He said:

"I heard one person was demoted—our Lead Teacher Specialist. This person functioned mainly as our principal. I've heard he would lose his salary and probably have to go back into the classrooms along with other Lead Teachers and curriculum planners with the district. So, two tenured teachers got pink slips, and three other contracted teachers (one has a credential, the other two were science teachers in the process of getting credentials) and both administrators were given notices of reassignment. Pomona Unified also sent out memos a little while ago saying the district is on a hiring freeze."

Sabet expressed his anger over the cuts.

"I think if you ask most teachers these days what their concerns are, they'll tell you class size. Instead of reducing class-size, student off-task behavior and teacher anxiety, the budget problems and sour economy are cutting funding for our public schools and increasing class sizes," he said.

"I think times are starting to get harder for average Americans—times are already unbearable for the significantly poor—and we will only suffer together even more if we don't act to stop militarism and reactionary government policies. What has been done and is happening is quite extreme with this administration, but what has the Democrat-controlled congress done yet? Clinton was a big military spender and corporate backer just like Bush. It's time we ask for adequate labor representation so our needs are actually realized," continued Sabet.

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