

California teachers protest budget cuts

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Some 200 teachers, parents and children marched outside Trabuco Hills High School in Mission Viejo, California—in southern Orange County, between Los Angeles and San Diego—on March 31, to protest a proposed \$19.3 million in cuts to the Saddleback Valley Unified School District.

A number of small children, accompanied by their parents, held up handmade signs that read “S.O.S. (Save Our Schools)” and “Leave No Teacher Behind!” The response from passing cars and trucks was overwhelmingly positive as many honked their horns in support of the teachers who wore pink, indicating that they were being given pink slips.

The cuts in the Saddleback Valley represent a 7.4 percent reduction in the school district’s total budget and would eliminate 228 tenured and temporary teachers. In addition, class sizes in grades 1 through 3 would be increased to a ratio of 30 students for every teacher; half of the day the ratio would still be 20:1 when a second teacher is brought in during reading and math instruction.

California may be facing the biggest public education crisis in its history. The steep cuts in the state’s school districts are the direct result of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger’s attempts to balance the state budget at the expense of working people. At least \$4.8 billion is to be cut from the state’s education budget, and more than 20,000 teachers, principals and school supervisors have received layoff notices since March 15. It is estimated that another 87,000 teachers will face job termination, out of a total of 350,000, if the governor’s budget request is passed.

From 1980 to 2000, California went from number 1, in terms of per-pupil spending, test scores and teachers’ salaries, to below 47 in the nation. Twenty-five percent of students in the state are “English learners,” who need help in special classes, and the number of schools teaching low-income students is well above the national average.

In San Diego County, school districts are slashing up to \$360 million by expanding classroom sizes at the elementary school level, and sharing nurses and librarians between schools. Los Angeles Unified, the second-largest district in the US, is also expected to cut \$460 million by eliminating elective courses and some sport programs and firing art teachers, counselors and faculty from cafeterias to

gymnasiums.

In Mission Viejo, the budget cuts have hit students and faculty particularly. The high school International Baccalaureate program will be discontinued, as well as elementary school music classes. The district also notified 53 temporary teachers that their one-year employment contracts would not be renewed.

As many as 27 percent of all administrators will be laid off, in addition to 9 percent of teachers, 6 percent of classified staff, and 2 percent of Pupil Services staff, who work with children with special needs.

At the rally in Mission Viejo, reporters from the WSWWS spoke to several teachers and parents who were protesting the school district’s cuts and the suspension of Proposition 98, which ensures a minimum funding of state schools.

Joining the rally was a delegation of teachers from nearby Capistrano Unified School District. Lelia West, a third grade teacher at Tijeras Creek in Capistrano, has four years’ seniority. She received a pink slip. “In Capistrano, there will be 365 layoffs. It’s a very diverse student population. Our school was the model of a new program when it opened in 2000. We teach in a differentiated style to reach GATE [gifted and talented] kids as well as English Language Learners. Now the professional learning community is going to be gone.”

Diana Morgan, named Teacher of the Year at Tijeras Creek, is getting laid off. “It’s kind of ironic that you’re Teacher of the Year and are getting laid off. Parents are shocked, ‘How can someone like you be laid off?’ It doesn’t make sense. Capo is laying off teachers hired after 2000. That’s eight years’ seniority. We’re getting lots of support from parents, who are upset because they get very attached to their teachers and want to have these same teachers for their younger children.”

Joy Kemmerle, a first grade teacher at Trabuco Mesa Elementary in Saddleback Valley Unified, said, “I’ve only been teaching four years and am getting laid off. Five other teachers at my site also got pink slips. It’s based on seniority, going back 10 years to 1998. Right now they’re proposing cutting 200 teachers, music, high school sports, and honors programs.

“So far it’s a little subdued at our school, mainly because people don’t know what’s happening. We will have a lot more kids in our classrooms with less time for individual time with the teacher. This hurts the kids in the long run. There’s a teacher with 10 years seniority who’s losing her job.

“They say the money’s not really there. But we have the wealth in our state. We need to spread it around more. Our school is not Title I [free breakfast/lunch program], but our student population is a lot more diverse than it used to be. These kids deserve the best.”

Many parents were pushing strollers and showing their support for their children’s teachers. Sue Schwartz, a hair stylist, brought her three children to the rally. She’s active in the PTA at Foothill Ranch Elementary in Saddleback. “I have my twin boys in fourth grade, and my daughter’s in kindergarten. We’re losing a lot of upper grade teachers, the ones who teach fourth through sixth. We don’t know what’s going to happen. Right now we have 20:1 in first through third grades. But we lost [the 20:1 ratio] in kindergarten five years ago. Now there are 30 to 32 children in the kindergarten classes.

“We have these restrictive laws pertaining to No Child Left Behind. When you don’t have small classes, the kids get left behind, especially when the district is also taking away programs like LAAP [Learning Anywhere Anytime Program], which is a place for kids to go and get help with reading.

“A lot of problems in SVUSD [Saddleback Valley Unified School District] go back to 1972. I just learned about this history recently at a PTA meeting at our school. Back then, they assessed districts based on high-wealth and low-wealth criteria. The low-wealth districts were Saddleback Valley, Irvine Unified and Capistrano, because back in 1972, these were all farming communities. Now, we’ve grown. Now, these communities have also wealthier families, like those who live in Foothill Ranch, Portola Hills, Coto de Caza, Ladera Ranch, Shady Canon and Northwood in Irvine. All these South County areas have grown a lot. These are just a few that didn’t exist back in 1972.

“So the formula for divvying up these funds is based on that old formula. There is only one pool of money for the school districts to share from. The ‘high-wealth’ districts, of course, don’t want to give up their funding. They would need to give a little for us to get a little. Back then, these included Newport-Mesa, Anaheim and Huntington Beach schools. They were the older and well-established communities with more population and income I think it’s time to reassess our districts.”

The rally concluded in order to gather inside for a presentation given by school officials concerning the budget

cuts. Many of the protestors were applauded inside.

The California Teachers’ Association (CTA) has not been an organizing force behind many of the protests happening in school districts around the state. As one of the parents involved in coordinating the protests at the Saddleback Valley Unified School District explained, “The unions didn’t organize this rally. They’re working at the state level.”

The CTA’s response to one of the most massive attacks on public education in the last several decades has been pathetic. Thus far, the CTA’s campaign has only consisted of a PR strategy, including a television spot, and letters targeting state legislators. Its entire effort is based on appeals to Democratic state Assembly members in Sacramento, who have worked hand-in-hand with Schwarzenegger over the last several years to impose continual cutbacks in social programs and funding for public infrastructure.

The CTA’s campaign to write letters to the legislature is a diversion. The unions are incapable of organizing the growing opposition and anger in the working class against the school closures and layoffs because they are tied to the Democratic Party and the profit system. In the end, the bureaucracy agrees with Schwarzenegger and the establishment that decent public education is unaffordable, in a state that is home to some 10 percent of the *world’s* billionaires.

In the context of a deteriorating economic situation, with rising fuel and food prices, and record foreclosures, the working class must unite and mobilize across the state against Schwarzenegger’s budget cuts. Public education is a basic democratic right that can only be defended through the independent mobilization of the working class against the two-party system that defends big business.



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