The California budget and the crisis of public education

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In school districts all over California there has been an outpouring of angry demonstrations by teachers, parents and administrators against Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's recent plans to cut more than $6 billion from the state's public education system in his proposed 2008-2009 budget.

The proposed $4.8 billion cut from secondary education and $1.3 billion from higher education are the result of the governor's proposed 10 percent across-the-board cuts in state social programs to address, in part, the state's projected $16 billion deficit. The governor himself declared a "fiscal emergency" in early January to deal with the projected shortfall, which at the time was $14.5 billion.

The budget situation is not unique to California. Twenty-two other states already face a combined budget shortfall of approximately $39 billion for fiscal year 2008-2009, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. This is double the number of states that reported a deficit six months ago.

Schwarzenegger is scheduled to release a revised budget proposal on May 15 after tax receipts are collected and tabulated. Many analysts have projected a sharp decline in property tax revenue, which would only intensify the current budget crisis and perhaps lead to even greater spending cuts. Schwarzenegger has adamantly refused to raise taxes of any kind, particularly on the state's wealthiest residents, whom he cynically claims simply don't have the ability to make any additional contributions to the state's coffers.

Schwarzenegger's proposals have already led to layoff notices for more than 20,000 teachers and school employees in the K-12 (kindergarten through high school) system alone. Should his current budget request be passed, another 87,000 K-12 teachers and staff will most likely lose their jobs.

The cuts will also have a dramatic impact on the state's public university system, leading to further decreases in spending, increased tuition and student fess, along with possible staff layoffs. California students were once able to attend these institutions free of charge, but have now seen their tuitions grow by more than 100 percent within the past four years alone.

Thousands of teachers, support staff, administrators, parents and students have held rallies all across the state to oppose these trends. Within the past two months, hundreds of students walked out of their classes in Encinal High School near San Francisco; 4,000 teachers, parents and students rallied in Mission Viejo; 1,500 university students marched the state capitol of Sacramento on April 21; and on April 18, more than 2,500 students from 40 high schools across the state participated in rallies and walkouts to protest the cuts.

These demonstrations must be viewed in the appropriate historical context. With an economy standing precipitously on the edge of disaster and two deeply unpopular wars being waged, a situation is unfolding where broad masses of people are in direct confrontation with the political establishment as they are being asked to pay for crises for which they are not in the least bit responsible.

The right to a free, quality education is also under assault all over the world.

In countries like Great Britain, the old social democratic parties like New Labor have abandoned any pretense of social reform and are leading a fight to privatize education and cut teachers' wages. On April 24, more than 200,000 British teachers mounted a work stoppage to protest, in part, salary increases that remain well below the rate of inflation.

In France, tens of thousands of students have protested in recent weeks against education reforms proposed by the Sarkozy government, which would include the sacking of more than 11,200 teachers and substantial reductions in course offerings. The protests have occurred across the country and have been met with severe police repression, while the leaders of Sarkozy's ostensible opposition in the Socialist Party and the student unions have done nothing more than applaud only the most cosmetic changes to his administration's policies.

The cuts in California are an assault on what was once the most progressive state educational system in the country. This legacy has roots in the California Constitutional Convention, where in 1849, convention president Robert Semple said, "If the people are to govern themselves, they should be qualified to do it. They must be educated, they must educate their children; they must provide means for the diffusion of knowledge and the progress of enlightened principles."

Nearly 160 years later, one can safely assume that the "progress of enlightened principles" is the furthest thing from the minds of the current governor and state legislature, and recent statistics are quite telling in this regard. Furthermore, the education cuts arrive on the heels of billions already slashed by Schwarzenegger and his Democratic predecessor, Gray Davis, over the past 10 years.

For fiscal year 2006-2007, California had a teacher-to-student ratio of nearly 26.1 to 1, the third highest of US states, and according to *Education Week Magazine*, which adjusts figures for per-pupil spending according to each state's cost of living, California ranked 47th in the nation. In terms of total school staff (principals, teachers, guidance counselors, librarians, etc.), the state ranks dead last with only an average of 68 staff members, 76 percent of the national average of 90 school staff.

California teachers also have only the 32nd highest salaries in the country when adjusted for cost of living. And like other teachers across the nation, they are often forced to use whatever money they can spare from their already meager paychecks to provide the most basic of educational needs for their students. Whatever costs they are unable to cover themselves are often defrayed by local Parent Teacher Associations, who often conduct fund drives not to send their children on field trips to museums and farms as they once did, but to simply provide them with the most basic of supplies from computer equipment to stationery.

This phenomenon represents a move towards the de facto privatization of the public school system along with its attendant class stratification, as students at poorer schools are unable to raise adequate funds for such

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basic necessities.

While more than 370,000 California high school seniors will graduate in 2008, the state ranks only 40th in the nation in terms of the rate of high school graduates entering college. California's situation is an expression of a much larger educational crisis in the US as a whole. According to statistics recently released by the US Department of Education, each of the 50 largest cities in the country had graduation rates of 58 percent or lower for the 2003-2004 academic year. (See: "An indictment of the profit system: High school drop-out rate in major US cities at nearly 50 percent")

The Public Policy Institute of California also recently conducted a survey in which 84 percent of Californians responded that affording college is at least somewhat of a problem for students today, while 53 percent called it a "big problem." Sixty-six percent of those surveyed also believed that the cost of a college education prevents qualified students from pursuing a higher education.

Lastly, the California Postsecondary Education Commission found that 18 percent of public college graduates and 29 percent of private college graduates have debt that would exceed manageable levels by accepting a job with earnings equivalent to a teacher's starting salary.

The immediate cause of the current budget crisis was the collapse of the US housing and high-tech bubbles. However, it also has significant roots in legislative decisions made in the late 1970s, in which the tax burden of the state's wealthiest residents was significantly reduced, laying the foundation for frequent deficits that required the intervention of the state's political system against the working class.

The claims made by Schwarzenegger and his political allies, that the state "doesn't have a revenue problem, it has a spending problem," are completely fraudulent. California is the wealthiest state in the country and as of March 2006, was home to 91, or nearly 19 percent, of the world's billionaires. While this minute social layer continues to accrue astronomical amounts of parasitic wealth, more than 20,000 teachers are being deprived of their livelihoods and millions of youth are being asked to make do with a woefully underfunded—and thus criminally inadequate—system of education.

The present attacks on the public education system will serve to further undermine the living standards of not only all those who work in this industry, but the entire working population of the state, which relies on public schools, colleges and universities to secure a decent education for them and their children. This latest assault comes in the midst of a sharply increasing social inequality and a worsening economic situation for millions in California.

The polarization of wealth and incomes in the United States has taken a tremendous toll in California. A report by the California Budget Office, entitled "A Generation of Widening Equality: The State of Working California, 1979 to 2006," notes that although many in the state are working longer hours than they did 30 years ago, the number of workers with health insurance and other benefits has declined significantly. More than one in five Californians under age 65 (21.3 percent) did not have health insurance in 2005, compared to 18.5 percent in 1987. The number of workers in the state who have a pension plan has declined from 57.7 percent in the early 1980s to 49.4 percent today. In addition, the study found that approximately 2 million of California's 9.3 million working families (21.1 percent) were below 200 percent of the federal poverty line in 2005, a miserable level of income that does not adequately provide for the state's high cost of living.

The Schwarzenegger administration continues the tired mantra of "no new taxes," while its nominal opposition in the state Democratic Party fundamentally agrees with the governor's draconian cuts, insisting only that some of the shortfalls be ameliorated with the imposition of regressive taxes.

Democratic state assembly speaker Fabian Nunez, for example, has called for the creation of an Internet tax along with an increase in the annual car registration fee, both of which will disproportionately affect working people and the poor.

The measures being proposed by Nunez and others will serve to exacerbate what is already a thoroughly regressive state tax structure. According to a report by the California Budget Project, the poorest fifth of households in California, with an average income of $11,000, pay an average of 11.7 percent of their income on state taxes. Compare this to the top 1 percent of households worth an average $1.6 million that pay only 7.1 percent of their income in state and local taxes.

Furthermore, no state politician on either side of the aisle has mentioned—much less fought to significantly recoup—the more than $10 billion stolen from the California treasury during the energy crisis of 2001, in which large energy corporations such as Enron illegally manipulated the state's power supply and energy markets to reap massive profits.

The response of the trade unions to the current situation, as exemplified by the California Teachers Association (CTA), has been pitiful. They have urged parents, teachers and staff to call and e-mail their representatives in the state legislature to express their opposition to the cuts. However, even a veritable avalanche of e-mails and phone calls will not convince any Democrat or Republican legislator that the budget cuts should be rescinded. In fact, this perspective was lent a rather farcical character by Democratic Lieutenant Governor Jim Garamendi, who recently urged parents, students and teachers to continue protesting the cuts and making appeals to state politicians—presumably including himself—to fix the budget crisis.

In addition, the CTA has told its membership that it will fight to keep the cuts away from teachers. In other words, their strategy is to try to shift the burden onto school support staffs, as if this would not have a dramatic impact on teaching conditions in the public educational system and these employees.

Furthermore, public statements made by the CTA leadership make no mention of the impact of the proposed budget cuts on other sectors of the economy, except to imply that only education funding is of any concern out of the dozens of programs slated for the chopping block. A recent resolution states that the "CTA calls on the governor and the Legislature to put our students first" and "reject across-the-board cuts that would damage our public schools."

The CTA, in collusion with the Democrats, has proven itself incapable of leading the struggle for basic public services and democratic rights, such as access to a high-quality education, as its actions over the past few years amply demonstrate.

In 2004, the so-called "Education Coalition," led by the CTA, agreed to a $2 billion reduction in Proposition 98 funding, the legal mandate that provides a minimum level of funding for K-12 schools and community colleges, in exchange for the governor's promise that the money would be returned when the state next experienced a budget surplus. Not surprisingly, the money was never returned. Instead, the CTA mounted a campaign accusing Schwarzenegger of abandoning his promises on education, despite the fact that as part of the quid pro quo over Prop 98 funding they supported Proposition 57 (the Economic Recovery Bond Act) and 58 (the California Balanced Budget Act).

The missing $2 billion has never been mentioned during the course of the current crisis by either the CTA or any Democratic legislators.

All these experiences indicate the necessity of making a decisive break with the Democratic Party and its allies in the trade union bureaucracy, including the CTA. The current struggle must be conducted in solidarity with all members of the working class, but particularly with those directly affected by the budget cuts, including administrators, custodians, health care professionals, the more than 7,000 state employees who will soon lose their jobs, and the hundreds of thousands of Californians who depend

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on state-provided services simply to maintain a decent standard of living.

While the assault on education manifests itself in various ways across the country and around the world, each expression finds its objective roots in the systemic collapse of the world capitalist economic and social order. An independent mobilization of the working class, based on an internationalist socialist program, is required to defend public education and to fight for the reorganization of society to provide for the needs of the vast majority, not the profits of the few.

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