

New York: city and state universities face deep budget cuts

Students' thoughts

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Hundreds of thousands of students in New York City's public university system have returned to classes for the fall term to learn that the state legislature has approved drastic cuts in funding that pose a serious threat to their right to a decent education.

The budget for the City University of New York (CUNY) system has been cut by 7 percent, or \$51 million.

On August 20, lawmakers in Albany went along with New York's Democratic Governor David A. Paterson's proposals to cut hundreds of millions of dollars in order to reduce the state's budget deficit. The cuts were approved almost unanimously by both major big business parties, with both Democrats and Republicans in the Senate voting twice by a margin of 51-6 for the package, while the Assembly first voted 128-10 and then 131-7 to approve the cutbacks (see "New York state legislature passes draconian budget cuts").

Out of a \$122 billion budget for 2008, \$427 million has been trimmed, and next year's budget will be cut by a further \$1 billion. Another \$2.4 billion will be cut for the 2011-2012 fiscal year.

What is happening in New York is representative of similar cutbacks being carried out across the US as the housing and credit crises make their impact felt in falling public revenues. In New York, this process has been amplified by the state's heavy dependence on tax revenues from the massive fortunes piled up on Wall Street, which accounts for fully one-fifth of the state's income.

The crisis on Wall Street is making itself felt just as sharply in New York City, whose budget deficit is projected to grow from \$68 million in fiscal year 2009 to \$5 billion in 2011.

Almost all the social services that the majority of the population depends upon will have funds reduced. Healthcare will be cut by \$141 million. Six percent, or the equivalent of \$77 million, has been cut from scores of grant programs that pursue such essential social and health services as HIV education or the prevention of breast cancer. New York City's Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), the mass transportation service upon which millions of New Yorkers rely, is proposing a \$2.7 billion cut in capital spending.

In the realm of education, in addition to the CUNY cuts, funding for the State University of New York (SUNY) has been reduced by \$96 million.

And the devastation is not set to abate in the near future. In an article for the *New York Daily News*, Governor Paterson wrote, "Even after these reductions, spending is still projected to grow by more than ten percent in 2009-2010, or more than double the rate of inflation. Clearly, we still have a long way to go to control our spending." The threat contained in this last part of his statement should not be lost on

anybody.

Anticipating an angry popular reaction to the cutbacks, Paterson wrote in the same article mentioned above, "I ... invite those who are critical of my call to action to disengage from the politics of the past." "Politics of the past" in this sentence undoubtedly refers to the period in US history when the American ruling elite pursued a policy of limited social reforms aimed at reducing class tensions. This is in contradistinction to today's ruling elite, which combines socially destructive governmental policy with sheer greed, arrogance and stupidity.

"Suggesting that we seek new revenues," Paterson continues, "by imposing new taxes or quick one-shot gimmicks, or finding ways to collect revenues that are likely to be tied up in years of litigation, is not a solution to the urgent challenge we face." Thus, the most obvious remedy to the state's financial difficulties, namely a dramatic increase in the tax rate on today's obscenely rich, is brushed off casually. This is because Paterson and the Democratic Party in general are just as beholden to the interests of the Wall Street financial elite as the other big business party in the legislature, the Republicans.

Indeed, in a *Newsday* article, Kenneth Adams of the Business Council of New York has praised Paterson and the State Senate for balking at tax hikes. Such are the social layers for whom Paterson and the two parties of big business speak.

CUNY to suffer substantially

The City University of New York (CUNY), founded in 1847, is New York City's public undergraduate and graduate university system. It is the largest urban university in the United States, consisting of 11 senior colleges, six community colleges, a doctorate-granting graduate school, a journalism school, a law school, and the Sophie Davis School of Biomedical Education. More than 450,000 students are enrolled in campuses located in all five New York City boroughs.

In terms of enrollment, CUNY is the third-largest university system in the United States. Only the State University of New York (SUNY) and California State University enroll more students.

The CUNY budget for the 2008-2009 school year is \$729 million, with \$51 million being cut from that amount as a result of the state's fiscal crisis.

According to the Committee On Higher Education, a governmental organization overseeing the CUNY budget, these cuts, in part, translate into: “\$2.7 million eliminated from institutional and departmental research services resulting in the elimination of three full-time positions, \$867,000 eliminated from library services resulting in the elimination of two full-time positions, \$964,000 cut from student services resulting in a loss of five full-time positions, \$290,000 cut in external and public services resulting in a loss of one full-time position, \$1.3 million cut in general institutional services resulting in a loss of 10 full-time positions, and \$1.5 million cut from administration and maintenance/operations resulting in a loss of 10 full-time/full-time equivalent positions.

“In total,” the committee continued, “31 positions will be eliminated. All positions will be eliminated through attrition.” This is only the first chop of the meat cleaver that the Democratic state administration is taking to CUNY, with more and deeper cuts sure to follow.

In testimony given on November 19, 2007 before the CUNY Board of Trustees on the Fiscal Year 2009 CUNY Budget Request, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) of CUNY, which represents faculty and staff, warned:

“Year after year, students, faculty, and staff are doing more with less. Work at CUNY is characterized by inadequate resources: not enough full-time instructional staff—faculty, counselors, or professional staff—to carry out the needed work with students; not enough office space, working escalators, lab equipment or supplies to do our work effectively; not enough funds for travel to conferences, to engage in research, or advise students. The overriding experience of those of us who work and go to school at CUNY is that we are making heroic efforts on a daily basis to keep the enterprise of public higher education functioning.”

Tuition increases are, of course, again being considered. Historically, it was not until 1975, after more than a century of high-quality, tuition-free education at CUNY, that New York City’s fiscal crisis led to the imposition of tuition, an action implemented by Democratic Mayor Abraham Beame. Mass demonstrations and protests against the hated measure ensued on the streets of the city.

The PSC continued, “The FY 2009 budget request calls for a 5 percent increase in tuition this year and increases matching the Higher Education Price Index (HEPI) in the future. Since HEPI has averaged a 5 percent per annum increase since 1990, the Compact, in practice, calls for endless substantial increases in tuition. CUNY community college tuition is already among the highest in the nation. Many of our current students have difficulty affording CUNY tuition, especially since state and federal financial aid packages are not designed to meet many of our students’ life circumstances.”

According to CUNY spokesman Jay Hershenson in an article in the *New York Daily News*, the system has already implemented a “pause” in non-faculty hires and has “looked to cut its purchases of supplies and equipment.”

SUNY and the budget cuts

The State University of New York (SUNY), on the other hand, is the system of public institutions of higher education in the entire state of New York. New York City’s public universities (CUNY) are also

state-supported, but are not officially part of SUNY.

SUNY is the largest comprehensive system of universities, colleges, and community colleges in the world, with a total enrollment of 413,000 students, plus 1.1 million continuing education students. It has 64 campuses across New York state, employs 28,000 faculty members, and features approximately 6,650 degree and certificate programs.

The cuts will have a disastrous impact on SUNY, with more than \$96 million cut from its fiscal 2008-2009 budget.

To illustrate the effect of the cuts on a local level, \$10 million is to be trimmed from the budget of one of SUNY’s colleges located in the central New York town of Cortland. Its president, Eric Bitterbaum, in an interview with NBC affiliate WSTM in Cortland, said the cuts “would be devastating, like a tsunami coming at us.”

According to Bitterbaum, the cuts will lead to the firing of most adjunct professors, the cancellation of several classes, and increased class sizes.

By way of comparison, SUNY Oswego, located in the northern New York city of Oswego, will also lose \$10 million. The University of Buffalo stands to lose \$16 million. Other larger state universities are set to lose more money.

What is being threatened with these cuts is the very right to a high-quality education, which has been continuously compromised and whittled away as working people and youth are compelled to pay for the social and economic crisis of capitalism.

Students’ thoughts

The WSWS interviewed several students at the City College of New York (CCNY), CUNY’s oldest campus, dating back to 1847, on their thoughts about the crisis.

Eva and Ndeye, both full-time students at CCNY from Ghana and Senegal, respectively, expressed their anger against the budget cuts and deteriorating social conditions for young people in general.

The price of “food and Metrocards [the card used by riders of the New York City subway system] really affects me,” said Eva. “The food’s too expensive. Nobody buys it.”

“Me going to the bookstore to buy a book for \$200? How am I supposed to be in school if I can’t afford it?” asked Ndeye.

“The health insurance that CCNY recommends is \$400 per month. Where will I get that?” asked Eva incredulously.

Eva said she saw little difference between the Democratic and Republican parties, “It’s the same system,” she said. “The people who make the money dictate to the people in power what to do. The rich are getting richer and the poor are staying poor. It’s totally unstable.”



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