

New York state workers rally against Paterson's budget cuts

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16 January 2009

Thousands of New York state public workers rallied January 7 in Albany to oppose sweeping budget cuts and threatened layoffs contained in the budget proposal of the state's Democratic Governor David Paterson.

While workers demonstrated outside in the cold, Paterson delivered his "State of the State" speech in the state capitol building, further spelling out austerity plans that were first announced in his budget presentation last month. His proposal would make public employees and working people across the state pay for the state's budget deficit of over \$15 billion.

The state of our state is perilous," Paterson warned. "We have an historic economic challenge, the gravest in nearly a century. For several months, we have been reeling from events." The theme of shared sacrifice, which permeated his earlier budget presentation, was again put forward as the key to overcoming the crisis and providing a better future. He has ruled out, however, any increases in taxes on the states corporations or its billionaires and multi-millionaires.

The proposed budget includes \$9.5 billion in cuts, primarily in health care, education, and a variety of social services. And, in what is likely to be a gross understatement, the Governor predicted that 225,000 New Yorkers could lose their jobs before the crisis is over. In addition, he has proposed dozens of new or increased regressive taxes and fees on everything from sugared soft drinks to driver's licenses.

Paterson's speech proposed a handful of paltry initiatives, including a plan to fight childhood obesity

and a program to promote renewable energy. These were far less, however, than has been the tradition in which governors have used the State of the State speech to lay out a whole range of new initiatives designed to curry favor with a range of interest groups.

Even the few new proposals that were made are likely to be negated by the effects of the budget crisis and economic downturn. As pointed out by one of the union rally participants who spoke with the WSWWS, while Paterson claims he wants to reduce childhood obesity, his budget will destroy educational and recreational programs which keep children active.

As an indication of things to come, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation announced two days after the speech that it would eliminate funding for the Empire State Games, the nation's oldest state-run Olympic-style competition.

Paterson's speech offered few specifics on his proposed cost-cutting measures. Senate Minority Leader, Republican Dean Skelos, alluded to this when he said, "I think we needed a little bit more nuts and bolts." Speaker of the State Assembly, Democrat Sheldon Silver stated that "Inevitably, there will be fewer resources for government programs that New Yorkers count on and some of the goals we have been working for and sponsoring as individual legislators, as a body, and as a state, will have to be delayed."

Working out the details of the State budget for the coming fiscal year will be take place roughly over the next two and a half months leading to the April 1 deadline. Both houses of the legislature are now

controlled by the Democrats, who will be responsible for the harsh attacks that are being prepared.

As Paterson spoke, workers assembled at the Times Union Center and marched up the hill in a cold rain to the front steps of the Capitol Building. Unions represented included the Civil Service Employees Association/American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, the Service Employees International Union, the Public Employees Federation, District Council 37, and the New York State Nurses Association. They represent workers performing a range of essential government functions from health care to social services to parks and recreation.

The demonstrators chanted “Tax the rich, not the poor!”, “Wall Street got bailed out, we got sold out!” and “Don’t touch our contracts!”

Workers expressed anger over Paterson’s proposal to withhold a week of their pay until retirement, saying that this amounted to a permanent loss.

The union leaders’ brief speeches focused on threats of electoral retribution against politicians who support attacks on workers: “We put them in, we take them out” and “If our jobs are at risk, their jobs are at risk.” The speakers urged pressure on the politicians — “let them hear from you”— but offered no proposals for independent struggle. Given that the unions have slavishly supported and are fully integrated into the Democratic Party, which is leading the attacks, this rhetoric rang extremely hollow.

Paterson and a number of other governors of large state have issued a joint call to the incoming Obama administration to substantially increase the federal government’s aid to states and municipalities as part of the proposed “stimulus package”.

However, even with such aid, Paterson said, “Our situation is so dire that even the greatest assistance from the federal government, the one we are proposing here today, will still not alleviate us from the responsibility of some rather severe action.”



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