Los Angeles public school teachers protest budget cuts and layoffs

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Thousands of Los Angeles Unified School District public teachers were joined by parents and other workers in a demonstration in central Los Angeles on January 29. The demonstration was called to protest the proposed state and local budget cuts.

The protest began at the LAUSD headquarters west of downtown and swelled at Pershing Square, as columns of teachers arrived from across Los Angeles in buses and trains. Addressing the teachers were officials from the Los Angeles Teachers Union, rank and file teachers, parents and students.

As a consequence of California's budget crisis, the Los Angeles Unified School District is anticipating a $500 million budget reduction. This will result in the layoff of some 2,300 non-tenured teachers next term. The LAUSD employs a total of 75,000 teaching and non-teaching employees. It is the second largest school system in the United States.

In addition to the impending sackings, teachers face the prospect of higher health care premiums and higher deductions on their health care benefits. The LAUSD also anticipates what LAUSD superintendent Ramon Cortines calls ‘drastic cuts' among the districts' 40,000 non-teaching employees. The California State legislature is currently considering a mid-year budget cut for primary and secondary public education of $10.8 billion.

One of the speakers was Jennifer Maldonado, a 12th grade student at Wilson High School and member of Inner City Struggle, which she described as "a community-based organization that works with students and parents to fight for educational equity and universal access for all students."

"I am here to stand in solidarity with the teachers of Los Angeles. Our teachers understand the conditions of the schools because they face them every day from the wrong side up. These conditions include overcrowded schools and classes that make it difficult for teachers to teach and students to learn," declared Maldonado.

Maldonado concluded by calling on students to actively support the teachers' struggle: "The only way we are truly going to see change is for the students and teachers to come together and organize to build power and demand quality education. We must unite our voices and see that the change we deserve becomes reality: more opportunities for students to go to college, lower classroom sizes and better pay for teachers and a strong student, parent and teacher voice. All power to the teachers!"

A non-tenured teacher, a district intern at Wilshire Hills Elementary School, said, "I'm thinking right now about one of my students in my class. Two weeks ago, when I received the news that they're making some cuts, and we were talking about this in class, we were discussing what was happening. One of my students—and this is a student that I've been pushing really hard to get into a science class—raised his hand in class and said, ‘I don't want you to go.' Right now I'm thinking about that student and my response, and I told him, ‘I'm not going anywhere.' The road...is long and there's going to be several battles with what I consider an all-out assault on education, and as a young educator, a new educator, I cannot understand how the richest nation in the world can cut the funds of something so natural to our society, and that means education."

Maria Escobar, a second grade teacher at the Los Angeles Elementary School in the heavily immigrant Pico-Union neighborhood spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*:

"I think that this protest is very important because the LAUSD and the State Legislature need to see that

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teachers are very serious about these cuts and that we are willing to strike over this. This demonstration shows that we are united and that our struggle is necessary."

Escobar, a 13-year veteran with the school district, described some of the conditions that teachers face at her school:

"Right now things are very stressful. We have tests and quarterly assessments coming up. Many teachers are worried pending the firing of teachers. It is hard enough to teach 20 children. You have barely enough time to get to everyone to help them learn," said Escobar, "It is going to be much more difficult if the class size increases to 30 kids."

"I do not expect to be fired, but some of my coworkers will. Right now they are saying that the firings will not begin until the new school year, but everybody is stressed over this. As things stand now parents are constantly organizing sales of candies, ice-cream and so on so that we can buy pencils and other supplies and to pay for field trips. I always have to buy supplies out of my own pocket, such as crayons for the children. A lot of us spend a lot of money to provide decent supplies for our kids."

"I think that instead of putting all that money into the war, they should put that money into our children so that they can have a better education and so that there is less violence on the streets."

Those words contrasted with UTLA President A.J. Duffy's demagoguery. Duffy, who has declared that he has no illusions about cuts beginning this spring, called on the LAUSD and on Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to ‘do their homework' and preserve teachers' jobs and benefits by cutting other parts of the LAUSD budget. He attempted to start a chant of ‘do your homework,' which received little response from the attending crowd.

Though the protest took place on the same day that a Superior Court judge granted Governor Schwarzenegger the authority to furlough state workers beginning next month, Duffy made no mention of this. The furlough, forcing workers to stay home two days a month, amounts to a ten percent pay cut for 235,000 state workers.

The LAUSD so far has made $400 million in cuts but has opted to operate at a deficit of $400 million this year rather than cut jobs or wages or benefits in the middle of the year, in part because it hopes to encourage 2,000 teachers to opt for early retirement. The deficit will have to be eliminated within two years.

As part of the cuts, the LAUSD did suspend funding for the Arts Community Partnership Network, a nonprofit organization that oversaw arts education programs across Los Angeles County and provided arts education at the city's schools. Among the programs eliminated were theater and music workshops and an instrument repair shop. These cuts have been particularly unpopular with teachers, some of whom have started an on-line petition to pressure the district into restoring the programs.

In addition to these cuts, the LAUSD is quickly running out of money to pay for the school breakfast and lunch programs for poor students.

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