

The victimization of public education in California

State budget cuts met with widespread protest

Kevin Martinez
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In an effort to rescue the state treasury and protect the wealth of big business and the rich in California, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Democratic Party passed a budget last month that imposes severe cuts in education. These cuts are having a devastating impact and have generated broad opposition throughout the state.

The new budget will reduce kindergarten-through-12th-grade education in California by \$8.4 billion. Higher education will be cut by \$900 million.

The full effects of this austerity budget are only now being assessed. In fact, not all school districts have calculated what measures they will have to take, what programs will be halted, or who exactly will be laid off. Some 18,000 layoff notices are expected to be sent out across the state.

In a typical example of the type of cuts being implemented, Petaluma City Schools has already approved a hiring freeze, a spending freeze, and the elimination of non-essential substitute teachers and overtime until next year. The school system is also considering reducing summer school programs, expanding class sizes, and eliminating counselor and other positions.

Diane Zimmerman, the superintendant of the Old Adobe Unified School District, told *Petaluma360.com*, "We'll have less of everything—students won't have as many textbooks and workbooks, and the school won't be as clean. But we'll feel the effect much more on a long-term basis."

John Walker, a principal at a private Petaluma school, St. Vincent DePaul High School, remarked, "Some people complain that schools just need to 'tighten their belt' like everything else, but for schools, these cutbacks have been going on for years." After the budget cuts, he said, "California would have the lowest funding per student of any state in the country."

The consequences are felt universally. Last week, South Bay Union School District eliminated 80 teaching positions, and Grossmont Union High School District cut 97 jobs.

Sweetwater Union High School District sent layoff notices to 109 teachers and counselors, while National School District eliminated 103 teachers. Cajon Valley Union District trustees agreed to cut 93 teaching positions, and La Mesa Spring Valley cut 88 jobs. In the Stockton Unified School District, up to 325 faculty members are at risk of losing their position.

At the higher-education level, tuition at state colleges and universities will be raised by 10 percent, marking the eighth straight year that fees will have been increased at 4-year institutions. The total increase in tuition since 2002 is 135 percent.

Another possible casualty of the budget cuts will be First 5 California, a local safety net service for the state's low-income and disadvantaged children, for which a permanent 60 percent reduction in funding is proposed. For this cut to go through, it will have to be approved by voters in a special May election. At that time, Californians will be asked to shift First 5 tobacco tax funds to pay for programs for foster children and kids with developmental disabilities. In other words, the "choice" being given to working people at the polls will be between gutting funding for needy children and...gutting funding for needy children.

Recently released data have underscored the already miserable state of California's public education system. The state has the lowest college enrollment rates in the US, according to a report by UCLA's Institute for Democracy Education and Access. By most educational standards, California ranks toward the bottom of states in the US.

Teachers, students, and other working people around the state are beginning to respond to this situation.

Margarita Oliverez, a senior at Chula Vista High School, gathered 500 student signatures in one day petitioning Sweetwater Union High School District not to eliminate any teaching position.

Last week, parents, teachers, and nurses in the same district demonstrated in large numbers to protest a planned meeting to vote on budget cuts that would result in the elimination of teaching positions. The vote was delayed because of the sheer numbers of people that showed up to voice their opposition.

In Lake County, more than 100 Kelseyville High School students walked out of their classrooms and marched to the local district office to protest the cuts in education. They carried a banner that read, "We have voices. Learn to Listen." Student organizers said that they didn't believe school administrators had "adequately heard the concerns of parents, teachers and students" at a local board meeting.

On Monday, hundreds of college students in Sacramento descended on the State Capitol to stage a mock funeral on the death of higher education in California. At Pasadena City College, students from 17 community colleges across the state protested budget cuts to education last Friday.

This week, demonstrations are planned across the state as part of the "Pink Friday" campaign; Friday, March 13, is the day by which pink slips—layoff notices—must be issued to teachers.

While the California Teachers' Association (CTA) and the California Federation of Teachers (CFT), the two major unions representing teachers and educators in the state, have been promoting these events, in reality they bear direct responsibility for the present educational crisis in California. Regardless of criticisms they've made of the budget deal, they continue to stoke up illusions in workers that placing demands on the Democratic Party is a viable means of defending public education. However, the austerity budget was passed with the overwhelming support of the Democrats, and the party has played a central role in all of the cuts to education implemented over the last decade and more.

The teachers' unions have also accommodated themselves at critical moments to Republican Governor Schwarzenegger's right-wing policies. In 2006-2007, for example, the CFT muted its criticisms of an austerity budget proposed by the Governor, claiming that in return it had been promised that the state would return \$1.6 billion worth of legally mandated funds taken from the educational system the prior year. The money was never fully given back, but Schwarzenegger and the entire political establishment benefited from the union's insistence that the Governor was taking steps in the right direction.

The gutting of funding for public education is part of a much broader attack on the living standards of working people as a whole, throughout the country and internationally. The world economy is entering the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression, as the massive

speculation binge of the ruling elite comes to a crashing halt.

The response in Washington to this crisis—by both the Bush and Obama administrations—has been massive trillion-dollar bailouts to the banks and financial institutions, while the jobs, living conditions and social programs of working people are attacked.

One manifestation of this crisis has been the bankrupting of states across the country, which are seeking to balance their budgets by slashing key programs such as education and health care.

The responsibility for the current economic catastrophe does not lie with the producers of society's wealth, the working class. It is the ruling elite that has created the crisis and opposes any measures that challenge its wealth and privileges. The broad majority of the population is being forced to pay to bailout privately held financial institutions operated on the basis of private profit. Key social needs such as education, deemed unprofitable by the ruling class and its political representatives, are targeted.

Not a single dime should be cut from public education, and there should not be any layoffs or cuts in school programs. Working people and their children should have access to the highest-quality public education system.

The only way to defend public education, however, is to launch a mass struggle throughout the country and internationally against the capitalist system that has created this situation. Capitalism must be replaced with socialism—the principle of private with the principle of social need. This means a complete break with the Democratic Party and its allies in the trade unions, and the construction of an independent party of the working class, based on a socialist perspective.



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