

California teachers protest mass layoffs

Our correspondents
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Thousands of schoolteachers, parents and youth held protests all throughout California on Friday to demonstrate against massive budget cuts in education. The events were organized by the California Teachers Association (CTA) on the last working day before pink slips were to be handed out to an estimated 26,500 teachers and an additional 15,000 janitors, administrators, bus drivers, and secretaries. This includes 8,800 educational workers in Los Angeles, 1,600 in the Bay Area and 1,200 in San Diego County.

CTA officials sought to blame the crisis entirely on Governor Schwarzenegger and Republican Party, while covering up the complicity of California Democrats in the budget cutting and the Obama administration, which has outlined its own right-wing education program, including merit pay and support for the expansion of charter schools. At the same time, the CTA has insisted cuts "be kept away from the classroom," suggesting instead that state officials cut the jobs of janitors, cafeteria workers and educational support staff rather than teachers.

A WSWs team intervened at the rallies to oppose this perspective and outline a socialist policy to unite educational workers and the entire working class in defense of public education.

Educators and their supporters were angered and opposed to the \$8 billion in budget cuts affecting their school districts. Many felt that education was not valued by official society, as evidenced by the fact that public education had been under systematic attack for decades, with the misnamed No Child Left Behind Act at the federal level, and now the bloodletting due to the California budget crisis.

In Fullerton, south of Los Angeles, 25 percent of the teaching staff is being cut, including tenured and probationary teachers. Art programs, librarians, and physical education are also being cut, along with five nurses who carry out vision and hearing testing and provide the daily needs of special education students.

Penny, a teacher from Garden Grove at the rally in Fullerton, commented on the expensive academic testing that students are forced to undergo, "They should throw out the testing before the jobs."

At the same rally, Wendy told the WSWs about Acatia Elementary School's shedding of six teaching positions out of a total of 20. She was also disappointed with Obama's stance on education, citing his endorsement of merit pay and charter schools. Regarding the budget cuts to education, "you could see this coming for a few years," she remarked.

Tony Wilson, teaches second year junior high in Los Angeles. Commenting on the attitude of the political establishment towards the state's educators, he said, "They're basically saying, 'We can mess you over because we don't have the money.'" He also mentioned that music for elementary students is being cut, and that the Fullerton

school district will only have 1.5 nurses for 14,000 students.

Dina Parker brought her 4th grade son Matthew to the rally. At Beachwood School where her son attends, 21 out of 30 teachers received pink slips. Dina said, "It blows my mind. No more free lunches. We have to use toilet paper now instead of Kleenex."

Stephanie, who teaches at Raymond Elementary, held a large sign that read, "Education will flop, because of the Kindergarten Cop!" a reference to one of Arnold Schwarzenegger's action movies. She said 10 of 20 teachers received pink slips at her school, which would eliminate all the educators for 2nd and 3rd grade. When asked how the school planned to go on teaching these grades, she said the school was going to bring in tenured teachers from outside and resort to even larger combination classes. Stephanie commented that she voted for Obama but that his current handling of the economy was like "trying to put a band-aid on too many things."

She was also disappointed that Obama broke from his campaign promise to end the war in Iraq upon assuming the presidency, saying instead he will commence a partial troop withdrawal by next year.

Stephanie noted, "He broke his promise, which will mean more people will die, and more money will get wasted when it should be spent here on education." Her brother is also in the Air Force and will be going back to Iraq for the fourth time.

At a Pink Friday rally in Simi Valley, a WSWs reporting team spoke with Nicole, who was asked what she felt about how promises for better education were broken by the budget.

"I don't know what they're doing in Sacramento, but it seems like they're robbing Peter to give Paul. There's a lot of misleading initiatives coming out and then you vote thinking it's going to help education, but then the money they're taking is going to hurt some other cause or program. I think they need to focus on what's most important, not benefiting just the rich and powerful," she said.

Nicole was asked what she thought of the fact that education funds were being cut in the richest state in the US. She replied, "What I do see is that California is the last in the US in terms of education. They say they throw money to it but education is not being taken care of. There are cuts every year. It's ridiculous to think that we're buying stuff to clean desks; we're buying toilet paper when we're low. If people knew all the little tasks that are being done to save money, maybe they'd see the bigger picture."

Nicole added, "I'm a single woman, I'm 39, and I've worked full-time for the last 13 years as a teacher. I don't own my own house; it's too expensive. I rent a room. I own my car, nothing extravagant. I want to live within my means. I give to my church. I try to do all the good things. All this doesn't seem enough and you feel like you're not getting ahead. There are people who can't make the mortgage payment and live in their cars. When you see how distressed people's conditions are, something has to be done."

Ignacio Saldain has been an educator for eight years. For five of those years he has taught chemistry and science to freshman at Royal High School. Although he did not receive a pink slip, Saldain explained that he and others like him would still be affected by the future layoffs.

"There will most likely be increased class sizes. There may be some furlough days which we definitely don't want. They will also most likely assign the remaining teachers to subjects which they are not qualified to teach. I know some teachers for example who are credentialed to teach certain subjects but who haven't actually taught the subject in many years."

Saldain seemed to think that both Wall Street and ordinary people were responsible for the present situation, saying that "we as Americans bear some responsibility for living way beyond their means. There are so many people who spend tens of thousands of dollars on a credit card when they don't have the actual funds to pay for it."

He did add, however, that he thinks "the billionaires and Wall Street and the banks are more responsible", admitting that he himself had been taken in by their manipulative lending practices.

"I was actually in the same boat. I bought a house at the wrong time. I didn't know the value of the house at the time, and I'm not an expert on the housing market or anything. However, the bankers knew that this was a fake boom and yet they didn't tell anyone so that they could reap super profits. So I suppose you could say it's 80 percent their fault and maybe 20 percent our fault, but that's even hard to say. After all, they were the experts who should've known better and we were not."

He went on to explain that he felt a sense of solidarity with the conditions other workers are currently experiencing, and expressed his concern over the social impact of decimating public education, as well as the consequences of an inadequate health care system.

"I think that we are right there with other workers, with nurses and other vocations and with doctors and lawyers as well for that matter. And as far as teachers go, we are public employees and are here to serve the people. I honestly believe that education should be the right of every citizen. It shouldn't be a privilege but a right. The only way to build a prosperous society is with a highly educated populace. So I believe in a strong educational system for everyone and also a health care system that meets people's needs.

"I feel like, and I'm sure I'm not alone in this, that you simply can't get sick because you'll be in a lot of financial trouble. Even with my health benefits as they are, paying \$256 per month out of my paycheck for health insurance, every time I go to the doctor I find myself \$400 in the hole, which is ridiculous."

Reporters from the WSWS also attended two Pink Friday rallies in San Diego. Teachers from the east county, mainly from the Grossmont Union High School District and the La Mesa-Spring Valley School District, met at Grossmont High School in La Mesa and marched to a nearby freeway overpass over Interstate 8.

Another rally was held further west, in Mission Valley, also on an overpass over Interstate 8. San Diego teachers held signs and banners over freeways all over the county in an effort to bring more attention to the protests.

Danielle, a 4th grade teacher told the WSWS, "We are out here to make more people aware of the cuts that are coming from Sacramento and the impact it is having on the lives of not only teachers but also students. There needs to be a greater understanding of the effect this is

having on school children. Our classes are overcrowded, we can't afford school supplies and our educational system is deteriorating. Sacramento doesn't care about the needs of teachers and students."

When asked why she felt the state is not taking education seriously Danielle responded, "They don't care because education is not profitable enough for them. It's not going to get them the immediate profits they are looking for. With education the profit is in the long-term."

Regarding the federal bailout to the financial industry she said, "That really makes me angry. Wall Street gets itself into trouble and then we have to bail them out. We get the short end of the stick."

In Mission Valley, the WSWS spoke to Connie, an elementary math and science teacher who recently received a pink slip.

"The state's priorities are all wrong. They are willing to help the banks but not education."

When asked why the financial sector is favored she responded, "They obviously feel that the banks are more important to the economy than education."

Dick, a retired teacher who spent 25 years in education, complained that, "the public sector is being starved, by the anti-tax crusaders."

When asked who exactly was to blame for the crisis and the cuts in education, Dick initially answered that the blame lies with the Republican Party, and that he was impressed with Obama's recent speech on education. After a lengthy discussion, however, Dick acknowledged that many of the positions on education spelled out by Obama (charter schools, merit pay, firing "bad" teachers and supporting "No Child Left Behind,") are consistent with George Bush's policy.

Dick agreed that the profit system is proving incapable of satisfying basic social needs. When the prospect of the revolutionary transformation of society was raised, Dick said that, "it might have to come to that."



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