

Media attacks California teachers

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Over the course of the past three weeks, a number of articles and opinion pieces have come out in different organs of the California press that target the efforts of teachers to defend their jobs and public education in the face of the worst fiscal crisis in the state's history.

Facing a \$42 billion shortfall, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Democratic-controlled State Legislature passed a massive austerity budget in February that cuts current state spending by \$14 billion. Allocations for education were gutted by \$8 billion, out of which upwards of \$5 billion is to come from kindergarten through grade 12 schooling.

School districts across the state are scrambling to figure out how to cope with these cuts. They are firing teachers, eliminating school programs, and foregoing regular maintenance and sanitation at buildings, among other things, to address the situation (See for example: Long Beach, California school board votes for deep cuts). More than 26,500 layoff warnings have gone out to educators, as well as another 15,000 layoff warnings to janitors, bus drivers, and school administrators, warning them that their positions are at risk.

The attacks on public education are widely opposed by those who work in the school system, as well as by parents, students, and working people in general. In March state-wide demonstrations were held to voice opposition to the layoffs. They were dubbed "Pink Friday," a reference to the pink slips that the school districts were sending out to laid-off teachers on the last working day of the week (See: California teachers protest mass layoffs).

The media sought to downplay these events. In the subsequent weeks there have been a series of articles in the Californian press defending the cuts.

Most of these statements claim that California's teachers are supposedly the highest paid in the nation, that overcrowding in schools is not a serious problem, and that the teaching profession as a whole should not be spared what is happening throughout the rest of the economy—in other words, job termination and unemployment. The authors accept the false premise that cuts have to be made in public education if California is to be brought back into good financial standing.

One article in the opinion section of the *Los Angeles Times*

March 26, entitled, "Why should teachers be a protected class?" was written by Larry Sand, the president of the so-called California Teachers Empowerment Network.

Accusing the California Teachers Association of "whipping up hysteria about possible layoffs" culminating in the Pink Friday rallies, Sand wrote:

"Now, everyone knows that a pink slip means, 'You're fired.' But it is very clear that these RIF's ('Reduction-in-force notices') are nothing more than an alert to a possible layoff—sort of the difference between a bullet to the head and a warning shot." In other words, the pink slips are merely warning shots *before* actual bullets to the head.

After speculating about how much federal stimulus money Los Angeles school districts may receive, Sand gets down to his real message: "In all honesty, it is certainly possible that some teachers will have to be let go. Although no one would diminish the seriousness of a job loss, we must be realistic. Our state is in dire financial straits—why should teachers be a protected class?"

In other words, because working people as a whole must pay for the present crisis, opposition to teacher layoffs and the decimation of public education is illegitimate.

Citing statistics about how the student population of Los Angeles has shrunk from 2003 to 2007 by 7 percent, while the corresponding teacher population has only shrunk by 1 percent, Sand argues that if the district were to go back to the 2003-2004 ratio of 20.64 students per teacher, it would need 2,000 fewer teachers than now.

In an effort to tap into widespread dissatisfaction with the California Teachers Association (CTA) and steer it into an attack on educators' jobs, Sand argues, "Unions hate the thought of fewer teachers—it means less money in the form of dues for them."

The reality is that regardless of the agenda of the CTA, it is the working class that is opposed to cutting the number of teachers in the schools, and the children of the working class who will suffer the real consequences should these cuts take effect. The union is actually working to shore up its position—not that of the teachers it supposedly represents—in the face of the present crisis by negotiating deals with the governor and thus proving its usefulness to the political establishment.

The CTA is one of the biggest supporters of Schwarzenegger's budget proposals, as explained by an April

11 article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (“Teachers are biggest backers of budget measures”), which reports that the union has contributed more than \$5.3 million to the campaign to pass the governor’s so-called “budget reform package.” In order for many of the budget cuts enacted by the governor and the legislature in February to take place, they have to be approved at the ballot box. In an effort to win support for these budget measures, the CTA has agreed to a rotten deal with Schwarzenegger in which it will back Proposition 1B that would guarantee \$9.3 billion in state funding after the present cuts, in exchange for supporting the overall budget.

In a column published in the *Los Angeles Times* on March 25, Steve Lopez uses the looming budget cuts to attack experienced teachers, whose jobs are more protected against cuts due to seniority standards.

Lopez writes, “In LA Unified, there is a possibility that if the cuts are made, the best and brightest teachers will be on the unemployment line, replaced perhaps by burned-out bureaucrats who may not have been in a classroom since the Carter administration and might never have been good teachers to begin with.”

Lopez advocates, along the lines promoted by President Obama, “education reform,” by which is meant charter schools and merit pay. “We need more flexibility all around—and less dead weight at the district headquarters—if we’re going to handle budget cuts and have any hope of improving our schools.”

In other words, accepting the budget cuts and the attacks on teachers as entirely legitimate, Lopez advances a right-wing attack on education, in which supposedly incompetent teachers are blamed for the crisis in California’s public education system. He advocates measures that would further bleed public schools of adequate financing.

This is an effort to divert people’s attention away from the real source of the state’s poor-performing schools—that is, the current budget cuts on top of years and years’ worth of prior cuts, a testing mania inspired by the misnamed No Child Left Behind Act, inadequate pay for teachers, and deteriorating socio-economic conditions for children. Instead, he seeks to pit newer educators against more experienced ones in a scramble for remaining jobs.

A recent article in the *Orange County Register*, dated April 9, called “Teachers underpaid or over paid? Economists can’t agree,” cites a statistical argument between economists over teacher pay in order to suggest that educators receive fair salaries. Published in the midst of massive attacks on teachers’ jobs, the objective of such a piece is to suggest that it is wrong to get upset about the education cuts, because teachers are, indeed, duly compensated.

The reasoning behind this argument, as presented in the article, is that by some measures teachers are paid equivalent to their counterparts in other fields with similar levels of education and job experience. This ignores the fact, however,

that all working people are underpaid and that real wages have stagnated and declined for several decades in the United States. The fact that, according to some measures, teachers receive the same pittance that other workers do is hardly a sign that their compensation is fair.

The underpayment of teachers does not fundamentally stem from whether or not they receive an equivalent wage to those with similar educational and professional characteristics, but from the fact that teachers’ role as educators of future generations is not and cannot be adequately compensated in a socio-economic system that places profit and private interests above those of social needs.

The budget passed by the California legislature that guts funding for public education and a vast array of other social services and programs leaves intact the wealth of the state’s dozens of billionaires and multi-millionaires, whose vast riches will not be touched to rescue an education system that serves the country’s most populous state.

The attacks on teachers in the California press come under conditions in which the job prospects for all working people throughout the state grow worse by the day, and living standards are eroded. Unemployment in the state is expected to reach nearly 12 percent according to UCLA’s Anderson Forecast.

The only way forward in defending teachers and their jobs as well as reverse the draconian cuts to public education is to demand that *no one* in the teaching profession lose their jobs because of the California budget fiasco. Enormous relief should be made available to fully fund education in the United States and reverse the decades’ long assault on the arts and sciences. Higher education must also be made available to everyone with a desire to learn.

A real alliance between teachers, parents, and students must be engendered in order to break from the stranglehold of the Democratic Party and their trade union underlings like the CTA. This can only be brought into being with the emergence of a mass socialist movement with the explicit goal of providing excellent quality education for all.



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