

Public education devastated by California budget cuts

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Two weeks after the California electorate voted down a series of ballot propositions that would have imposed austerity conditions and regressive taxes, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has advanced a wide-ranging set of proposals to slash whatever remains of California's social safety net.

California faces an ongoing budget shortfall of \$24 billion and is fast reaching a state of insolvency. In February, the Democratic-led State Legislature passed a budget deal that included tax breaks for sections of big business and \$15 billion in cuts to social programs and public education. Despite this, the California treasury is still short many billions of dollars, prompting further attacks on the living conditions of working people and the public services upon which they rely.

The attack on social services in California is fully backed by the Obama administration, which has rejected any "bailout" of the state. While trillions have been allocated to the banks, the government is determined to force states to carry out major cuts. California is seen as a model for cuts in other states, which provide much of government spending for education and health care.

Public education is being decimated. In late May, Governor Schwarzenegger announced revisions to his May budget proposal that include \$1.6 billion in cuts to the state's education system for the 2008-2009 school year and \$4.2 billion in cuts for 2009-2010.

These reductions in spending, coming on top of \$11.6 billion in cuts already passed by the state government this year, will make California the last state in the US in terms of funding-per-pupil. They translate to roughly \$3,000 in less money for every student in the state.

School districts across the state will be forced to delay funds for textbooks, increase class sizes, and cut seven days off the school year. Many districts are on the brink of insolvency. Arts and music programs, physical education courses, summer school, advanced placement, special education, and other vital courses will be eliminated as a result of the new round of cuts.

College students will especially feel the pain as more than 200,000 incoming students will lose most or all tuition assistance under the Cal Grant program. Cal Grants help students to enroll in a public or private university by offering financial assistance as long as they meet grade-point-average requirements and are residents of the state. They can range from a few hundred to several thousand dollars, and, unlike student loans, they do not need to be paid back.

New grants for students attending college will be rescinded and existing grants to already enrolled students will be significantly reduced. By 2011, Cal Grants will be completely phased out.

According to the California Student Aid Commission, which manages all Cal Grants, about 118,000 college-bound students who were awarded grants to attend school in the fall will have their grants terminated.

At the same time, the University of California and the California State University systems, once among the best education systems in the US, will face a further \$335 million in budget cuts this year and the next, forcing tuition hikes. The UC system will have a \$531 million shortfall next year, while the CSU system faces a \$410 million dollar shortfall.

CSU will be proposing a number of measures including: a salary freeze on the vice-president/chancellor positions, a hiring freeze on "non-essential" positions, termination of all "non-critical" equipment and supplies purchases, and travel restrictions for employees. For the first time in its history, CSU will announce a system-wide limit to the number of students enrolling for fall 2009.

At CSU Stanislaus an additional \$6 million will be revoked from the school's budget, on top of the \$6.2 million that has already been cut. University President Hamid Shirvani told the *Turlock Journal*, "With cuts of that magnitude, either fees would have to be raised by about 30 percent or there will have to be some substantial cuts in the workforce, or some combination of the two." He added ominously, "There would be no alternative."

The UC Hastings College of Law would have its state funding of \$10.3 million, 40 percent of its operating budget, effectively eradicated. This would mean that this once public-funded school would no longer be state supported.

Community colleges will also be forced to offer fewer courses during the summer. The Los Angeles Community College District, with nine campuses, is no longer offering a second summer session. One East LA campus already has 10,000 students enrolled.

College of the Desert (COD), a community college in Palm Desert, will face \$4.7 million in cuts through 2010, the deepest in the school's 47-year history. With an annual budget of \$40 million, the cuts represent a 10 percent decrease in the school's funds. Funding for school counseling and student services will be cut by 73 percent.

COD spokesman Tom Wixon told *The Desert Sun*, "I've never

seen anything like this—it's a tsunami. These are all programs designed to help people negotiate the college process who otherwise would be intimidated. Community colleges are all about a second chance. They always have been."

So far the school has frozen hiring, purchasing of new equipment and non-essential travel. However, the enrollment at the school has increased. Like many community colleges, the College of the Desert saw a 15 percent increase in summer enrollment compared to last year, and is expected to see a 17 percent increase.

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is expected to cut \$131 million more this year and up to \$273 million next year. The district has already cut \$560 million from this year's budget and is proposing to lay off up to 2,500 teachers. The district may also have to get rid of summer school, after-school programs, and switch some employees to a 10-month work year.

The news of summer school being cancelled has been one of the most tangible expressions of Gov. Schwarzenegger's budget cuts. At least 225,000 students enroll in summer school in LAUSD, the state's largest school district.

The severity of the cuts in the offing have provoked outrage among educators, students, and parents. In Los Angeles, a group of nine teachers and two community activists have started a hunger strike to protest LAUSD's plans to lay off 2,250 teachers and increase classroom sizes.

In UC Santa Cruz, 100 students and staff gathered for a demonstration May 27 to protest the \$13 million in budget cuts. The students organized under a group called "Students of Color Collective" held a banner at a rally that read "Welcome to the University of Institutionalized Colonialization." The students feared that Latinos, Black, and other minority students would be unable to afford access to the school after a 10 percent increase in tuition that was approved by the UC Board of Regents recently.

However, although the budget cuts would no doubt deny many historically-oppressed minority groups from attending college and receiving vital social services, the working class as a whole, regardless of skin color, will bear the brunt of these massive cuts to the state infrastructure.

High School students in Los Angeles had a walk-out on May 22 to protest LAUSD's plans to lay off thousands of teachers. At one school, students threatened to boycott the state testing that determines a school's ability to earn allocated money for high-performing schools. The largest demonstration saw 450 students march three miles from the Santee Education Complex, where more than 30 teachers will lose their jobs, to the LAUSD's headquarters in downtown LA. School police arrested two students after the High School contingent occupied the District's outside smoker's patio.

Many student organizers were afraid to give their names to the media fearing retribution from their school administrators. At a Monday rally in Santee, police ticketed three students for "disorderly conduct." Ron Gochez, who teaches World History at Santee, told the *Los Angeles Times*, "It's a very interesting sentiment on campus. Teachers are almost depending on the students because it's the last opportunity to do something."

On Monday, parents and teachers drove to the State Capitol to

tell legislators of the State Assembly and Senate budget committee in Sacramento how the cuts will affect them and their children. One parent, Laura Kieffer of Pasadena, told legislators, "We've lost music, drama, art and dance teachers. We've lost our middle school orchestra. We've lost our 5th grade band. We've eliminated our computer instructional assistant. We've lost all of our librarians."

Pixie Hayward Schickele, a second-grade teacher of English-language learners from Richmond, told legislators, "We cannot take more cuts. We are already bleeding to death." She added, "Add to that, our district is now proposing taking away our health coverage for our families, retroactively to January 1st. Who'll come to teach the children?"

One of the testimonies from the speakers mentioned how a \$300 million cut to bus transportation would leave many children stranded without the means to get to school from home. Rebecca Scheel, a bus driver for more than 12 years told the committee, "My students live in rural Gilroy, many miles from school, across the 101 Freeway, without a safe route to walk or even ride their bikes. Many parents work in the fields and are not available to take them in the morning to school. There is no public transportation...Our kids desperately need the school bus to get to school safely."

Despite hours of such testimony, Democrat and Republican lawmakers were not moved. In fact, one Assemblywoman's remarks, Noreen Davis, a Democrat from Santa Rosa, gave crocodile tears to the teachers while expressing the real attitude of the political establishment to the education crisis. "I feel their pain. I share their pain. I share all their concerns. The challenge is, how do we balance the collapse of the world economy with continuing to educate our children?"

Within the framework of the capitalist system, this "balance" means the impoverishment of the American working class and the dismantling of public education. The war that is being waged against public education and what little remains of the state infrastructure in California is one of the most glaring example of the failure of capitalism.



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