

LA School Board votes to slash school budget

Our reporters
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On Tuesday, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Board voted 5-2 to approve a budget with \$1.6 billion in cuts over a three-year period. The drastic measures will further devastate a school system already reeling from layoffs and program cuts.

The new budget will likely result in layoffs for 2,200 teachers and up to 2,000 school staff. The school district has already implemented or is planning reductions in busing, the consolidation of schools and increasing class sizes, and cuts in books and other school materials. Art and music programs, as well as kindergarten teacher and nurse positions, will be slashed.

On top of hundreds of millions in cuts already implemented, the district plans to cut about \$132 million this year and \$143 million the next year. In 2011-2012, planned cuts will soar to \$844 million. The school board has already said that it will push for major work and wage concessions from teachers.

The cuts in Los Angeles take place in the context of a statewide budget crisis. Republican governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Democratic Party legislature are currently discussing a compromise budget that will include massive cuts to key social services. This will include several billion dollars in cuts to education. Both parties, backed by the Obama administration, are determined to make the working class pay for the economic crisis. The administration has repeatedly refused federal assistance to California.

The board's proceedings were often interrupted by shouts and catcalls from audience members, including many teachers. One called the board "predators" who were "ripping us off one more time."

Outside the District building, a few hundred teachers, students and supporters assembled. Some carried the union's trademark "LAUSD Shame on you!" signs. Five tents for "campers" on hunger strike remained pitched on the sidewalk.

The United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) union called for members and supporters to "pack the board" in

order to try to pressure the board members. This perspective has proven completely bankrupt, and again had no effect on Tuesday. Superintendent Ramon Cortines and other board members responded by insisting that they had no choice. "I have not seen any alternatives" despite "asking for recommendations," claimed Cortines.

Union officials continued to frame the problem in terms of school board inefficiency and shortsightedness. Board member Tamar Galatzan suggested making "deep cuts in the bureaucracy," echoing a common refrain from the UTLA.

The UTLA again called on the board to spend more federal stimulus funds this year. Board members countered that such a course would only make things worse in the next two years. In fact, the union does not contest the need for drastic cuts. It only wants to have a say in how they are meted out. Other than vague protests and pleas to government officials, the union has put forward no serious proposals for dealing with the crisis.

The UTLA has not even made a serious demand on their Democratic Party allies in the California Legislature to raise taxes on the wealthy, that is, on those who benefited from the policies that led to the current economic carnage. The Democrats, for their part, have made it clear that measures that question the financial prerogatives of the financial aristocracy are off limits.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several of those who attended the meeting.

One of the hunger strikers, Yolanda Santorio—in the sixth day of her fast—said, "I don't know if it's correct to use the word 'extermination' but it seems like there's a plan to just get rid of millions and millions of people: low income, poor, the ill, those that lack an education. It seems like it's all programmed, a decision being trickled down from the top."

"I'm a social worker," she said, "and just today I received a memo telling us that starting June 30, Medi-Cal will no longer cover dental services, psychiatry, medication, very critical medical interventions—no more. What's going to happen to all these people that have no

money?”

Yolanda said the cuts were having an immediate impact on the ability of teachers to help students. Whereas before, teachers would be able to intervene and give special attention to failing students, the resources simply are not available. “Where are we going to get the tutoring for these students now? Where are we going to get the after-school programs? Where are we going to get the summer school? All that is gone. So if we have students that are not getting a good grade point average, they’re finished.”

Asked whether the hunger strike would have an effect on the school board, Yolanda replied: “I don’t think that we’re here to change the way they think. We’re here to do our part. We try to bring consciousness through these kinds of drastic measures, and I call it drastic because it is a sacrifice.”

A group of four women—elementary school parent liaisons all dressed in black for the occasion—spoke to the WSW. “We’re here to support our schools, our teachers. We don’t want our classes to become even more overcrowded,” said Alma Garcia.

Alma talked of recent changes in the schools. “I guess everybody is nervous about what’s happening, especially the cuts. In our school, they cut five teachers, an assistant principal, one of the custodians, a safety aide, and surely next year is going to be a lot harder.”

When asked what they will do if they don’t get results from the recent actions they’ve participated in, Alma replied, “We’re just going to keep coming up here every day. We’ll never give up fighting.”

One reporter asked about the insistence of some of the union leaders in framing the attack on education as a racial question. Lourdes Abelard replied, “It’s an attack on all people. It’s not a racist attack.”

The reporters passed out statements from the WSW, and many took them, some commenting that they read the website.

A teacher who asked to remain anonymous said, “I do not think the Democratic Party is on the people’s side. I think right now they’re fully corporatized. They might as well just be the Democratic Party Incorporated. They’re in the business of staying in business and misleading their constituents. Every time somebody gets in office, that’s it; they turn their backs on us. They do a complete about-face on us, and we can’t even get heard anymore.”

“It seems like to me that with Obama we’re not getting anything any different from the Bush administration,” he added. “I didn’t vote for the Democrats in the last two

elections. I voted Green, but they’re right next to the Democratic Party, too.”

The teacher said he reads the WSW every day. “The reason I go there is because I feel like I don’t get the full story from the mainstream media. In fact, you’ll never get anything that is significantly about the issues. And then when I go to the more Democratic sites—TruthOut, TruthDig—I still feel like they’re siding with a particular party. *Democracy Now* does that...”

About WSW, the teacher commented, “You go to the people on the sites that are being most affected. I saw the interviews of laid-off GM workers in Detroit. The people that you guys interviewed, they were incredibly articulate. They really know what’s going on.”

Tommy Escarga is the founding director of Proyecto Common Touch, an organization that works to help and defend California female parolees. She is a former inmate herself. “We’re very much aware of the school-to-prison pipeline, and that’s one of the reasons that we’re here.”

“I do register as a Democrat sometimes, but the truth is that the whole mentality of the Democratic Party is to sustain the system as it is,” Tommy added.

Rosa Martha, also spoke to WSW reporters: “Besides being a singer, I am also a teacher in Mexico. I am in this fight because I want justice for everyone. With my songs I want to strengthen the spirit of social rebellion, of criticism of what is, and solidarity. I am here because I want to support the idea of education for all.”

“I believe that this capitalist system has been designed to cause inequality, injustice, and ignorance,” she added.

Kevin Armenta is a second-year social studies teacher for high school students. He said: “I believe the union needs to focus not just on how the cutbacks are affecting the working teachers, but also the students. But the union leadership has done very little to rally support and unite teachers in this struggle against the cutbacks. The only thing that has been done is what a few teachers have done—prod the leaders to do something.”

“We need to realign our priorities,” Kevin added. “If we bail out the corporations, if there’s money for the war in Iraq, then we have the money for education.”



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