

After the March 4 protests against education cuts

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8 March 2010

On March 4, tens of thousands of students and workers demonstrated in opposition to education cuts throughout the United States.

The largest marches were held in California, where state and local governments have pushed through a 32 percent increase in fees for many college students, along with deep cuts in K-12, community college and university education funding. This month, tens of thousands of teachers in the state will receive notices that they could be laid off by the fall.

The demonstrations are an initial manifestation of growing anger and resistance to the policies of the corporate and financial elite. Their significance extends far beyond California. The same agenda of cost cutting is being imposed throughout the country, spearheaded by the Obama administration. Obama has publicly supported the mass firing of teachers and is blackmailing states into expanding charter schools and into carrying out other attacks on public education.

The March 4 demonstrations were not simply student demonstrations; they reflect a developing movement in the working class. As the San Diego rally marched through downtown, hundreds of working class students from local high schools joined in, as did many local workers, who left their houses and workplaces to join the demonstration.

The class composition of the student body is itself predominantly working class, reflecting significant changes in demographics since the last period of major student protests in the 1960s and 70s. The vast majority of college students today come from working class families, and many students have to work to put themselves through school. College graduates confront a bleak job market, along with thousands of dollars of debt.

Neither is this growing opposition limited to the United States. The March 4 events come in the midst of a growth in working class opposition internationally. Over the past

several weeks, strikes have broken out throughout Europe in opposition to government-imposed austerity measures, dictated by international financial markets.

Workers in the United States and Europe are victims of the same international drive to slash social spending to pay for the ruination of society by the financial elite. There is growing anger over demands that the working class pay for an economic crisis that they did not create.

Many more expressions of popular opposition will emerge in the coming months. If this opposition is not to be sidetracked and driven into a dead-end, however, it requires a new perspective and program.

There was a significant component of grass-roots organization in planning the March 4 events. Many students, just coming into political life, are reacting to the fundamental attack on public education by seeking a way to fight back.

This largely spontaneous popular opposition, however, was combined with the influence of trade unions and political tendencies that encouraged the illusion that the political establishment, and in particular the Democratic Party, could be pressured to defend public education, or that mass protests by themselves could repulse the attack. The teachers' unions, which gave only token support for the demonstrations, are pushing for a change in a rule that makes it more difficult for the state legislature to raise taxes.

In its interventions, the International Students for Social Equality, the student organization of the Socialist Equality Party, advanced an independent perspective and program for the working class. The ISSE called for opposition to all cuts in education and other social services and an emergency jobs program to address the unemployment crisis. To meet the pressing social needs of the population, it called for the nationalization of the banks and major corporations and an end to militarism and war.

These demands clash directly with the program of both

political parties. As demonstrators marched through the streets, they chanted "no cuts, no fees, education should be free!" This is at a time when the entire political establishment supports spending cuts as the only alternative to resolving the states' fiscal crises.

The ISSE called for the mobilization of the entire working class to reorganize society to meet social need, not private profit.

There are two mutually antagonistic social forces in contemporary society, taking two irreconcilable stands on the question of public education. The financial aristocracy, which controls both parties, is seeking to convert the working population into low-paid laborers. They have no interest in educating a population destined for such a future.

Only the working class is interested in the fullest development of human society and industry. Its interests, unlike that of the financial elite, lie in the betterment and enrichment of all society.

The defense of public education is bound up with the socialist transformation of economic life. The preservation and expansion of universal education is incompatible with the preservation of the profit system, with the subordination of everything to the accumulation of wealth by a tiny minority.

On April 17 and 18, the WSWs, SEP and ISSE are holding an emergency national conference on the social crisis and war. This conference has been called to discuss a new socialist strategy to unify the working class in opposition to war and the attack on jobs and social programs.

We call on all workers and young people looking for a way to fight back to attend this conference. For more information and to register, click here.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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