

New Jersey: Thousands of high school students walk out to protest education cuts

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Tens of thousands of students from across New Jersey left their classes Tuesday to protest \$820 million in education budget cuts by Republican Governor Chris Christie.

The budget cuts, averaging 11 percent across all districts, will result in the mass layoff off teachers and the destruction of arts and sports programs throughout the state.

This display of mass opposition among student youth was organized entirely by the students themselves. The movement developed on the social networking site Facebook, where an event announcing the strike accumulated more than 17,000 participants.

The demonstration tapped into growing opposition among students and broad sections of the working class to the attack on public education. Large protests took place in Newark and Camden, two of the most impoverished cities in the United States, as well as in more middle class districts.

The political establishment and the schools themselves condemned the actions, even as they work to push through the budget cuts. Many students said they had been suspended for taking part, and the demonstrations were greeted by police throughout the state.

In downtown Newark, hundreds of students converged on City Hall, chanting "save our schools!" as mounted police officers watched from a close distance. (A video of the demonstration can be found [here](#))

According the Newark's *Star-Ledger*, "Thousands of students filled the streets of Newark in protest of Christie's budget cuts shortly before noon today as police struggled to corral them into Military Park."

At West Orange High School in West Orange, a wealthier suburb of Newark, students also walked out of class. They raised chants and sang in support of their teachers. One West Orange senior was cited by the *Star-Ledger* as telling a group of students: "This is not our mistake and we will not suffer for it. Enough cuts! Enough is enough!"

Byron at Camden High School in Camden in southern New

Jersey told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We walked out because the governor of New Jersey is cutting educational funds for public schools and also college. It's causing some teachers to even retire in fear that they'll lose their jobs. It's bad enough that Camden schools have old torn books and half of the computers barely work. They expect us to succeed but they won't provide the tools for success?"

Victoria from Cherry Hill High School West near Camden, where over 300 students walked out, told the WSWS, "Our teachers aren't allowed to strike and teachers who haven't been there for more than ten years are getting fired. We actually like those teachers so we all decided that we would go through with it and walk out at 10:00. Nobody thought that so many people would actually do it, and all of a sudden, the whole school walked out.

"There were campus police in the front and back of the school," Victoria added. "They told us that nobody would be getting in trouble for being involved, but one girl already got a call from the school that she was suspended for it. Nobody should be getting in trouble for it!"

When students walked out at Williamstown High School in southern New Jersey, police responded by telling students to leave school.

A student from Williamstown High remarked on a Facebook site: "The announcement was made that anyone participating had to leave the premises. Around 10:30am, we were told we were in lockdown, which ended about 10:40am ...we were told anyone else leaving to be in the news would get disciplinary action as well as everyone else who left before."

A Williamstown High student, Joe, told the WSWS, "We didn't do anything wrong. We left school in a peaceful protest. We were demonstrating against Chris Christie's budget cuts, and we were punished for it. There were a lot of cops there telling us to leave and that we weren't allowed back in the school. The school even went on lockdown while we just demonstrated in the parking lot."

"Channel 3 said that there were 300 of us but there was more like 500," Joe added. "It's unfair that we're getting suspended for it. I could understand detention, but not suspension."

Hundreds of students left classes in Montclair in North Jersey, where over \$100,000 will be cut from the high school's athletic program.

"A large group" of students from Lincoln High in Jersey city in Hudson County walked out at 1:15 PM, according to the *Jersey Journal*, and marched to the Board of Education's offices, chanting "Hell no, we won't go." Some members of the group attempted to march to Snyder High to ask students there to join the walkout, when the "police forced the group to head back toward Lincoln." According to a school board member cited by the *Jersey Journal*, Snyder students also walked out of class.

One Lincoln High student was injured after she was struck in the head by a rock.

The protest at County Prep and High Tech was particularly well organized, according to local media. The school district plans to eliminate all the school's athletic programs.

Along the Jersey shore near Atlantic City, in Pleasantville, where 52 school staff will be cut, smaller numbers students walked out of class. *PressofAtlanticCity.com* quotes one parent, Virginia Faulkner, who had joined the protest: "The students have the right to stand up for themselves. The budget cuts aren't fair to the students and staff."

In South Jersey, students boycotted class at Voorhees's Eastern Regional High School. Mount Holly's Rancocas Valley High School also was hit by the boycott, where students held up homemade placards that read, "Help our teachers help us."

Predictably, Governor Christie's press office denounced the students' actions: "Students belong in the classroom, and we hope all efforts were made to curtail student walkouts," Christie's office said. The press spokesman failed to note that as a result of the governor's own actions, the classrooms of students are being "curtailed" through massive budget cuts.

The response of the teachers' union, the New Jersey Education Association, was the same. While many teachers face layoffs and supported the student action, the union is working with the state to impose cuts. The NJEA said that students were "engaging in civil disobedience" but should not walk out of classes. The NJEA has not considered even the most minimal statewide strike action in response to the cuts.

The actions of the students run into conflict with the demands of both the Democrats and the Republicans. The attack on public education is a bipartisan policy. In New Jersey the cuts are being forced through by a Republican governor. In New York, however, they are led by a Democratic governor.

At a national level, they are spearheaded by the Obama administration. Many young people supported Obama in the hopes

that he would change the hated polices of Bush. On coming to office, however, Obama expanded the bailout of the banks, handing trillions of dollars to the major Wall Street institutions. As a result, the top 25 hedge fund managers took home over \$25 billion dollars in 2009—that is, on average each made more than the entire amount of the devastating cuts in New Jersey.

The bank bailout has been followed by the demand for cuts, including in education. Obama has conditioned the limited funds available for education to the shutting down of schools in more impoverished areas and the mass firing of teachers. Obama himself publicly supported the firing of all teachers in Central Falls Rhode Island in March.

The treatment by the authorities of students, including police bullying and suspensions by school administrators, is outrageous, and the politicians bear full responsibility for it.

All reprisals against students who participated in these actions must be dropped.

The actions by students in New Jersey are part of a growing movement of opposition throughout the United States. To be successful, this opposition must be guided by a new political perspective.

Public education cannot be defended within the framework of a society in which every aspect of political and economic life is determined by the interests of a tiny layer of the population—which controls both political parties.

The International Students for Social Equality, the student organization of the Socialist Equality Party, urges students in New Jersey and throughout the country to build a unified movement with the entire working class, based on a socialist program. To find out more about the ISSE, visit intsse.com. To join, click here.



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