New York, New Jersey governors tie school aid to teachers' concessions

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In a crude effort to pit teachers against the communities they serve, New York Governor David Paterson and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie have offered to grant additional state funds to school districts whose teachers' unions cooperate in wage freezes and other concessions.

According to the *Buffalo News*, the New York governor said, "It's certainly apt, I think, that we would be trying to reward the districts where those who make extra sacrifices, so that's certainly a conversation we'd be willing to have."

Paterson put forward the New York version of the plan only a week after he delayed for a second time $2.1 billion in state aid to schools districts thoughout the state. The delay will cause real hardship for some upstate districts.

This has been accompanied by a flurry of calls from Democratic and Republican politicians in New York state as well as the corporate-owned media for "sharing the hardship," as Paterson and the state legislature attempt to close a $9.2 billion budget gap by cutting spending on schools by more than $1 billion.

In March, three Democrats in the State Assembly asked the New York State Teachers' Union (NYSUT) to support a wage freeze. Sam Hoyt of Buffalo, Ginny Fields of Suffolk County in Long Island and Michael Benjamin of the Bronx noted, "The 'Great Recession' has impacted every level of society and has created a new economic order."

They said the union should "assist school districts in meeting their funding challenges by considering the voluntary postponement of scheduled base and step pay increases."

Absurdly identifying themselves with ordinary New Yorkers, the three politicians continued, "As parents and taxpayers, we hope that teachers will appreciate our desire to put forward a solution that will not reduce services or put an additional strain on already overburdened taxpayers."

The proposal to attack teachers' salaries and benefits has met with enthusiastic approval from the media in the state. The *Buffalo News* noted that in East Aurora, southeast of Buffalo, the school district's 140 teachers had agreed to forgo two days' pay and waive the district's $500 contribution to their health savings accounts. The stated goal of the East Aurora concessions is to reduce tax increases in the community.

Another upstate media outlet, WNYmedia.net, told teachers, "Working people pay your salaries and NY teachers make more than almost every other state in the US. You[r] average salary, $56,200, is substantially above the average NYS [New York state] resident per capita income of $30,804."

According to LoHud.com, "Some unions are playing ball. Teachers in Brewster, Eastchester, Nyack, Pelham, Somers and Scarsdale are among those who have already agreed to wage freezes or other limits in their compensation."

Other teachers' unions in the state have also curtailed their contractual demands or opened their contracts up for renegotiation. West Seneca, also near Buffalo, has reduced the pay increase for its teachers to a meager 1 percent this year and 2 percent for each of the next two years.

In Long Island, the Roslyn Teachers Association accepted a 12-month wage freeze and agreed to delay the annual step-increase for six months. In Port Washington, the teachers' union agreed to a wage freeze for the next year, "modest" increases for the next four years after that and other concessions.

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These givebacks come in a state with some of the deepest social inequality in the world. Upstate cities such as Buffalo and Syracuse have nearly a third of their populations living at or below the poverty line. Yet, New York state is home to more than 60 billionaires. This class, guilty of precipitating the current economic crisis, controls amounts of wealth that could not only stop the budget cuts, but also fund a massive development in public education.

In New Jersey, Governor Christie, a Republican, has proposed trimming $819 million in school aid to help close an $11 billion state deficit for the coming fiscal year. This will affect nearly 600 districts statewide.

In a survey conducted by the New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA), 85 percent of the local school districts that responded said that they will lay off teachers and 64 percent said they were seeking to reopen existing contracts with teachers. The NJSBA has called for a wage freeze on teachers' salaries.

As with the Democrat Paterson in New York, the Republican Christie has offered aid to districts where teachers have accepted austerity contracts.

According to the New Jersey governor's web site, the proposal would provide "aid dollars in an amount equal to the Social Security and Medicare payroll deductions that would have been paid on the salary increase were a freeze not adopted" to school districts whose teachers' unions accepted a wage freeze.

Christie's cuts to the education budget have been met with widespread protests across the state from teachers, parents and students.

At a recent appearance at Montclair High School in Montclair, where the district, with 6,700 students, faces a loss of $5.4 million in state aid, students protested the presence of the governor with handmade signs.

Christie thanked the Montclair Education Association for accepting a wage freeze. Speaking of other teachers' unions that have yet to accept a wage freeze, Christie said, "It saddens me that that they put their own personal pecuniary interests ahead of the interests of the children."

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted recently, "Despite Christie's method, long-established, of seeking to divide workers, the reality of conditions in New Jersey speaks with vastly more force of the true class divisions. According to Mainstreet.com, New Jersey has the third highest concentration of millionaires of any state in the country. At the same time, New Jersey is also home to areas with poverty suggestive of the third world—cities like Camden, where 40 percent of the population live below the official poverty line. In the state's largest city, Newark, roughly a quarter fall below this threshold."

In both states, the local unions have echoed the argument of big business politicians that concessions are the only alternative to mass layoffs and the alienation of local residents through tax hikes.

In both states, the actions of their governors show the bipartisan nature of the attacks on the working class, as well as the complete incapacity of the trade unions to resist these attacks in any way. The aim of both Paterson and Christie is to redirect the anger of millions away from the Wall Street speculators and onto other sections of working people, as well as to lay the basis for even deeper attacks on wages and working conditions.

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