

In the shadow of bankruptcy

Yonkers, New York slashes schools, services

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Yonkers, just across the northern Bronx border of New York City, is the fourth largest city in the state of New York with a population of 200,000. It was a manufacturing hub on the Hudson River until the mid-twentieth century, with Alexander Smith and Sons Carpet Factory, Waring Hat Company, the largest hat manufacturer in the country, and Otis Elevator headquartered and producing there.

As the industries closed and moved away, the city's population stopped growing and it became a more impoverished urban center. By 2008, one quarter of Yonkers' children lived in poverty. Now, it is listed as the country's sixth most indebted city, with a \$300 per capita debt.

This year, the state and city have rained budget cuts down on city workers, residents and students. There were persistent reports that the city was running out of money and faced bankruptcy as the last fiscal year ended on June 30. Democratic Mayor Philip Amicone had presented a doomsday budget claiming a \$100 million deficit. The media predicted Yonkers would be taken over by the state if it didn't pass its city budget in mid-July, and more reports surfaced about the city facing bankruptcy.

The mayor held off passing the city budget after the school board cut over 400 positions in the Yonkers Public Schools. More than 200 teacher positions were eliminated and school programs such as art and music were slashed. Yonkers petitioned for relief from the state to no avail, and was forced to bear the full brunt of New York state education and city aid budget cuts. After July 1, the city sent layoff notices to 54 Department of Public Works and Parks (DPW) workers and cut back garbage collection for residents to once a week. The city administration also dismissed 36 firefighters, demoted 27 more and closed down two fire stations.

Garbage piled up across the city, leaving neighborhoods stinking from rotting trash and posing a public health danger as residents faced a record heat wave.

Firefighters and residents around Fire Station 8 rallied against the firehouse's closure. They lay down in the driveway in front of the fire truck when the city threatened to remove it from the station house.

Yonkers finally passed its city budget last week, but continued to demand more concessions from the DPW workers, represented by Teamsters Local 456, and the fire unions. They also hiked the property tax by 4 percent and raised the income tax surcharge on all Yonkers workers by 5 percent.

The Teamsters have agreed to give back about \$700 of each member's annual pay plus the \$2,000 payment for their benefits the city was obligated to make. The total in concessions given up by 450 DPW workers amounts to \$1 million. In return, the city has restored twice-weekly garbage pickup, but rehired only 33 DPW workers.

A year and a half ago, DPW workers took a pay cut for six months

and gave back \$400,000 from their health and welfare fund. Mayor Amicone thanked the Teamster president for his "leadership" in pushing through the concessions.

One fire house has been reopened and five firefighters recalled at an undetermined pay rate. This resulted in part from raising the regressive income tax surcharge to 15 percent.

Fire Chief Augustine Nigro from the reopened fire station explained the firefighters' situation. "The city has laid off 36 firefighters and demoted 28 more out of 400 Yonkers firefighters," he said. "The people being demoted are taking a 20 percent cut in pay. Two fire companies are being shut down.

"There are two firefighter unions. One is for the ranks, and the other is for the officers. The officer corps work force has been cut by 20 percent. We acted together along with some neighborhood residents when we lay down on the driveway to block our fire truck from being moved out. If we weren't here, the closest station would have an additional response time of 5 or 6 minutes. This would create a dangerous delay.

"I am not in favor of taking any more pay cuts. We have already taken concessions. Last year we worked for free. We came in on chart tours, when other firefighters are out on vacation or a day off, for free. Usually, we would get time and a half for this work. Moreover, we cannot guarantee our jobs would be safe even if we took a 20 percent pay cut."

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* attended a Yonkers School Board meeting where parents, teachers and students came to demand that the layoffs and cutbacks be rescinded and to express their anger over the renegeing of the School Board and state legislators on assurances that there would be no further cuts. School Superintendent Pierorazio greeted a demonstration of Riverside High School students with the arrogant announcement that he would be making more cuts to education, including the elimination of varsity athletics in Yonkers.

Gail Baxter, who was the parent coordinator for the Yonkers schools for 12 years until her job was eliminated June 30, told the WSWs: "I am concerned about the families who will have nothing when their children return to school in September. The learning environment will be different because there are fewer teachers, new teachers, and many older teachers are laid off. The class sizes will be larger.

"This is going to have a negative effect on the quality of education. It will be difficult for students to reach higher goals. Now the schools are charging \$50 a month per student for a bus pass. This doubles the cost from last year. And they only started charging students for school transportation two years ago. Now it costs a family \$500 a year for one student. Families are facing higher rents and other costs, and a world that looks like this."

Anthony Moranti, a parent, was the first to speak at the meeting. He

asked whether Yonkers could even be called a school system after all the cuts.

“But the question is, what is next,” he said. “I thought the budget was done. Reconsider this. Make sports happen.”

Another parent demanded that the board “come out and say publicly what the truth is.” He continued, “Tell people there will be 30 or 32 students in a class.”

The president of the Yonkers Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) said, “I am very angry. Last week when I stood here with people from Albany, school transportation programs and all the cuts were set. Everything was OK. That is what everyone said.

“Now I just heard sports are being cut. Sports are a lot of people’s lives. This is a crime. Look at the kids who are here. I am very upset and everything is not OK.

“The kids didn’t know. They were on the practice field when I texted them that their program was going to be cut.”

Darius Lofton, the quarterback on Gorton High School’s football team, told the meeting, “Without sports I am not going to college.”

Riverside High School student Charlie Cruz described how the student protest had been organized. “The School Board is laying off 200 teachers. The class sizes will be larger. Programs are being cut.

“The demonstration was to protest these cuts to our education. This started when we found out that our art teacher was being cut as school ended. When this happened, I thought students haven’t been heard from. So I made an event page on Facebook two weeks ago.

“Seventy-eight people have signed up. I reached out to students at other high schools. As the discussion went on, it became clear that more students had more reasons to speak out. I am on the Student Council at Riverside and Alexis is Student Body president, so we organized the demonstration, came here and spoke.”

Rene Eberhardt, another Riverside High School student, said: “I am going into my senior year. My brother is a freshman. If they cut sports, I cannot play on the volleyball team.

“Riverside has been a good school in the past. I feel lucky for the last four years to have nice-sized classes. To go from that to 30 students in a class will be really crazy.

“I am taking advanced placement US history, and it would be difficult to learn like that. I get distracted easily, and there is less of that if the class size is smaller. It is like one year things are good, and the next time around they are suddenly bad. I think they are making budget cuts because of the bad economy.”

Alexis Acuna, also a Riverside student, explained: “Our main focus at the demonstration was to rally against the program cuts and for the 200 teachers who have been laid off. I was in the advanced placement US history class and there were 32 of us in that class. It is impossible to learn like that.

“I’ve been taking art classes for three years. Now the art program has been cut. Many colleges look for four years of study in art. My teacher was helping us make a portfolio. Now my teacher has left. How am I going to make a portfolio?

“I think students work harder when they have a support system. If they don’t, a lot of students are led onto the wrong path.

“The people on the school board are not fighting. What do I say to my brother to justify that we allowed them to end sports? They should see that Yonkers needs to take a stand.”

A supporter of the Socialist Equality Party addressed the students, parents and teachers at the meeting, receiving strong applause. “I am a teacher in a New York City public high school,” he said. “I came to support the Yonkers students, parents and teachers who are angry at

the budget cuts because this is not just a local issue, and there is no solution on a local basis. It is not a question of deciding which programs should be sacrificed. Not only should there not be any cuts, but this meeting should vote to demand more funds for education.

“While the government gave trillions for the banks and the wars and is letting BP off the hook, we are told that the mass of people who work and produce everything must pay for an economic crisis we did not create, one that was created by a financial elite and its pursuit of profits. Obama has created a competition-based Race To Privatization that is about not aiding public education, but destroying it. There is no real stimulus, and Medicaid cuts are forcing more state cuts.

“It is not only Governor Paterson’s cuts, but the contempt of the state legislature for the people of the state in making de facto cuts by failing to pass a budget.

“Education is fundamental to democracy and there is no constituency for public education and democracy within the corporate elite and their representative parties, the Democrats and Republicans. They are thinking, ‘Why do we need to maintain public education for the mass of youth who face futures of unemployment or low-wage jobs?’ The 2011 budget situation is said to be even worse.

“There are resources. Instead of bailouts creating more debt for us to pay through new taxes, the banks should be taken over and turned into public utilities—as should BP and the oil industry—so that their resources can be used for education, jobs and infrastructure. The bank accounts of the CEOs with their bonuses should be expropriated. Instead of a Yonkers income tax surcharge of 10 to 15 percent on workers, we need to remember that back in 1959 there was a tax of 91 percent on a million-dollar income.

“This will not be done by the Democrats or Republicans. We need to break from the two-party system and create a party of the working people with its own socialist program to unite workers internationally against the system that monopolizes wealth for the rich while rationing education and all social programs.”

In the end, the school board voted to retain varsity athletics in Yonkers for the fall season, contingent on more layoffs or concessions by teachers and other education workers.



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