New York students and teachers protest draconian budget cuts

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On Wednesday, hundreds of students and teachers from across New York state gathered at the capitol in Albany to protest against Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo's new state budget plan, which includes $1.2 billion in cuts to education spending. The protest was held on the eve of the legislature's adoption of the measure, one of the most severe austerity budgets in state's history, one day before the April 1 deadline.

The protest was attended by groups of students from several SUNY (State University of New York) campuses; the university system will be devastated by the brutal cuts, now that the new budget will go into effect.

The $132.5 billion budget represents a 2 percent reduction from the previous fiscal year that ended on March 31. Apart from worsening an education system already in decay, the cutbacks will include historic cuts to social service programs and health care. Growth in school spending will be retrained to the growth in personal income, which is expected to be 4 percent this year. And growth in Medicare spending is to be tied to rate of inflation in health care, which is also expected to be 4 percent.

While both Democratic and Republican politicians claim that there is no money to save jobs and provide vital services, the budget incorporates a tax cut for the rich. It allows New York's "millionaires tax"—a state income tax surcharge on the state's wealthiest three percent—to expire, putting about $5 billion a year back into the pockets of the rich. The working class is being made to shoulder the full burden of the economic crisis with cuts in services and the layoffs of tens of thousands of teachers, state, county and municipal workers.

Protestors at Wednesday's rally expressed their outrage at the cutbacks, which will hit working class students the hardest. Many of them carried homemade signs and chanted slogans like, "Tax the rich, not the poor!"

"It's not a budget crisis. It's a crisis of priorities," said Cayden Mak, a graduate student at the University at Buffalo. Mak slammed Democratic Governor Cuomo and lawmakers for slashing SUNY operating funds once again which he said will result in even larger class sizes and program cuts. "It's preposterous to let the millionaires tax expire and at the same time...cut programs for the most vulnerable New Yorkers," Mak said.

"We feel that we should have been represented better, that our children need an education, and we felt that the governor's not doing his job," said another protestor.

The students' anger was further provoked when they were denied entry to the senate and assembly viewing galleries that had been closed off in order to prevent protestors from slowing down the proceedings. The day before the protest, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver had claimed that visitors would be "welcome."

Several galleries were shuttered, prompting many protestors to bang on the locked doors as lawmakers voted on the budget plan. The senate lobby was also closed. Only senators, their staff and journalists were permitted to enter.

"I am highly, highly disgusted with how I've been treated today in this building," said Amparo Sadler of Central Islip. "I can't even go into the gallery to sit down and listen to what's going on." Sadler expressed concern for her granddaughter, who she fears will be denied a quality education as result of the budget cuts. "She needs to get a damn good education, not just any kind of flimsy education," Sadler said.

As night fell, state officials and police officers attempted to prevent the delivery of pizzas to the demonstrators after allowing delivery to legislative staff, infuriating the protestors and leading to chants of "no pizza, no peace." When Democratic Senator Bill Perkins

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from New York City claimed he would bring in the pizzas, one protestor shouted, “What about the budget”? According to WNYC radio, Perkins evaded the question. “We’re not doing the budget right now, we’re doing the pizza right now,” he said.

Despite the outrage expressed by students and workers, a series of bills were passed clearing the way for the budget’s final approval. The draconian spending plan has been billed as a major “victory” for Cuomo by much of the media. “It’s a new day in Albany,” the governor said in a video released Thursday. “Government needs to recognize the new economic reality. Government needs to tighten its belt and cut the waste.”

The cutbacks will take an enormous toll on the state university system, and the impact will be felt on every SUNY campus. The budget “shortchanges” the university system by cutting state operating aid to SUNY campuses by $100 million, according to Phil Smith, president of United University Professions, which represents faculty on 29 SUNY campuses. “That brings the total budget cuts to SUNY’s state-operated campuses to nearly $700 million over the past two and a half years, or one-third of SUNY’s operating budget,” Smith said in a statement.

“Slashing SUNY so deeply means more cancelled classes, fewer course offerings and more students and families forced to pay for an extra year or more of college at a time when they can least afford it,” he added.

New York City’s university system will also be severely impacted by the state budget. The 2011-12 Executive Budget Briefing Book released by the governor’s office noted a $70.1 million reduction in funding for CUNY (City University of New York) campuses. According to the Briefing Book, base aid to SUNY and CUNY community colleges was cut by $46 million, about 10 percent. A week before Wednesday’s demonstration, students and faculty from several CUNY campuses blocked the capitol in Albany to protest against the cuts and demand higher taxes on the wealthy. Thirty-three people were arrested at that rally. While a statement released by the governor’s office stated that $86 million had been restored to SUNY and CUNY universities and colleges, the statement did not specify what schools will benefit from the restoration.

The brutal cuts will have disastrous consequences not only for state-run universities and community colleges, but for public education at every level.

The administration of billionaire New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg—one of the biggest beneficiaries of killing the millionaires tax—described the budget cuts as “devastating” and has warned that they could translate into 4,600 teacher layoffs.

Based on Cuomo’s initial proposal for a $1.5 cut in education spending, the New York State School Boards Association had estimated that school districts outside of the state’s five largest cities might have to lay off 5,000 teachers. While the legislature restored about $230 million of that cut, it is unlikely that it will be “enough to move the needle significantly in terms of layoffs in many districts,” David Albert, a spokesman for the school boards association.

According to the *New York Times*, “Besides New York City, other urban school districts as well as smaller, poorer districts, particularly those upstate, are also facing difficult choices because they are heavily dependent on state aid.” Unless additional state aid is provided, the city of Yonkers may be forced to lay off up to 20 percent of its work force, including teachers and administrative staff.

Schools districts in affluent suburbs are also struggling to deal with the cuts, even though they are less dependent on state aid. “As our outside sources of revenue decrease, the challenge is to maintain the quality and breadth of programs that we offer and not to overly burden our taxpayers,” said Henry L. Grishman, superintendent of the Jericho school district on Long Island.

The new budget will result in thousands of layoffs.

The austerity budget also includes $450 million in savings from the state workers, which the Cuomo administration aims to realize through contract negotiations with the unions. The governor has warned that 9,800 state workers will be laid off unless a deal is reached.

“The job cuts would be the biggest single-year decrease in the state work force in at least 15 years, the last time the state’s year-to-year spending decreased,” according to the *Times*.

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