

California teachers and students denounce cuts in public education

Our reporters
16 May 2011

Thousands of teachers, students and supporters in California participated in demonstrations Friday to oppose cuts in public education.

The government in the largest US state, led by Democrat Jerry Brown, has already passed \$8 billion in cuts to social programs and higher education. Brown is insisting that if he does not get passed a series of regressive tax extensions, he will implement billions in cuts to K-12 education, which will lead to thousands of teacher layoffs, increased class sizes and school closures.

Brown and his allies in the trade unions are seeking to use the threat of further cuts in public education to blackmail workers into supporting the extension of the taxes and fees, including sales and vehicle taxes that mainly target the working class. Both the Democrats and Republicans reject out of hand any increase in taxes on the wealthy to pay for the budget cuts.

Highlighting the growing attack on teachers, school districts in the Sacramento region announced that more than 1,200 teachers have been laid off. Thousands more throughout the state stand to lose their jobs this year.

The bankrupt perspective of the trade unions was on display Friday, the culmination of a week-long campaign aimed at pressuring lawmakers to back the tax extensions. The unions supported Brown and have supported the devastating cuts to social programs already passed. Their central aim is to prevent the growing outrage among workers and teachers from breaking free of the Democratic Party, and to convince them that the only alternative to massive cuts is to support the tax extensions.

“If we don’t get the extension, then public education in California will die,” said A.J. Duffy, president of the United Teachers Los Angeles.

The right-wing perspective of the unions was one

factor in the relatively lower turnout of teachers at the demonstration. About 1,000 to 2,000 attended the rally in the state capital of Sacramento, far less than the 10,000 anticipated by the union. Rallies in Los Angeles and San Diego had several thousand each.

Teachers who did participate, however, were motivated by deep opposition to the cuts, and a desire to fight to defend public education. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to teachers and their supporters at several of the rallies. They also distributed and discussed a statement issued by the Socialist Equality Party and International Students for Social Equality, rejecting all cuts and calling for a break with the unions and the Democratic Party. (See, “Education is a social right! Unite teachers, students and workers against all cuts!”)

Adriane is a sixth grade teacher who has been laid off from Ethel Philips Elementary School in Sacramento. She is entering her fifth year of teaching, but has already been laid off four times. Eva is a special education teacher at the same school. She has not been laid off, but faces over-enrollment, along with declining access to needed resources, like school nurses and psychologists.

Asked about the impact of the deep cuts in public education, Adriane said, “We have to work with outdated textbooks. When the texts refer to the previous century, they are referring to the Nineteenth, rather than the Twentieth Century.

“Our school does not have up-to-date computers that could be used in the classroom. Furthermore, since the school is in a poorer district, most parents do not own computers that might help as a substitute. Programs, like art, are being cut. Also, class sizes are increasing, making it much more difficult to provide individual attention to students.”

“It’s a shame we live in the richest country, but have the poorest schools,” lamented Eva.

Like other teachers, Adriane and Eva became educators because they believe in education and care about the future of the children they teach. Both teachers had previous higher paying jobs, but became teachers because of their dedication to education.

Pamela Greenhalgh, a speech language pathologist at Santa Ana College, attended the demonstration in Los Angeles. “Our support services, part-time teachers, got laid off. It’s really dire. We lost our music program. The charter schools don’t want our special education students. There’s no money for training; I spent \$6,000 on my own training for the American Speech Language Hearing Association (ASLHA). I spend \$2,000 on my own materials. I’m tired of being treated as the enemy.”

Asked about the budget cuts, Pamela said that big business was responsible. “We spend \$2,000 more on average in taxes than Wal-Mart and General Electric.” Pamela added that she was opposed to the Obama administration’s education policy. “[Education Secretary] Arne Duncan has no clue. Race to the Top is nuts. Special education kids have to be tested under No Child Left Behind! Education is now for the really rich or really smart.”

James Palumbo, a teacher at West Valley Occupational Center in Woodland Hills, also attended the Los Angeles demonstration with two of his students. He has received a pay cut, due, as he described it, to the “massive budget cuts mandated by the state and enforced by [Los Angeles Mayor and Democrat] Antonio Villaraigosa’s cronies on the school board.”

Palumbo said, “This is not about Republicans and Democrats. Both of them are part of the problem. They’ve been cutting funding for education, and they’ve been basically stealing public funds to use on private nonunion charter schools. This is what’s happening in Los Angeles.”

Eritha, a high school student in Los Angeles, said that the cuts to education had already had a devastating impact on her school. “We’ve lost a lot of teachers that we used to have, and then there’s not enough room for all the kids in the classroom. The lunches have been

getting like really bad. The kids feel discouraged. I feel like what’s the point of continuing if they’re just going to keep on taking our education away from us?”

“Instead of spending money on education, they are using it to fund wars and other things that are not needed.”

Jaime and Josh are students at North Hollywood High School. “Our history teacher is getting fired,” Josh said. “Our school requires a lot of busing, and it might become a charter. We have one counselor for over 350 kids. We have lost computers, books. Our school has really special programs that are being cut.”

“I think there’s a huge divide between what the politicians care about and what 99 percent of the people care about.”

Asked about the situation facing young people, Jaime said, “I think they’re being cheated out of an education. There’s not much of a future waiting for the youth, only catastrophe.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact