

California teachers and students protest against education cuts

A WSWWS reporting team
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Over the past three years, \$20 billion has been cut from California's schools and colleges in order to close the state's budget deficits. These cuts have eliminated 30,000 jobs, in addition to causing numerous school closures, program reductions, and class size increases.

Last Tuesday the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to teachers, students and parents attending a rally at Central Los Angeles High School # 9, a magnet high school with a focus on the arts. The rally was part of a series of events happening across the state to protest the continuing assault on education.

Maureen Longaker is a theater arts teacher for grades one through six, and described the reason she was protesting: "The school district is depriving children of a meaningful education by eliminating arts programs. Last year they cut the arts by 30 percent. This year, they plan to eliminate another 60 percent. When we were at capacity, there were 60 teachers at theater arts; now there are only 13 left."

When asked what she thought the future would bring Longaker responded, "Personally, I am very worried about public education. I am worried that it will no longer be a right for children."

Longaker's fears are well founded, with a nationwide drive underway to expand charter schools and privatize public education. As part of its "Race to the Top" initiative, the Obama administration has continued its policy of shifting funds away from "under-performing" schools, demanding that such institutions either fire the principal, fire half the staff, convert to charter schools, or simply close.

Like many at the rally, Longaker felt abandoned by both the Democrats and Republicans. "One monster with two heads," was her description. "Obama had

promised he would walk the picket lines with us. He never showed in Wisconsin."

Cynthia Miltenberger expressed similar discontent with California Governor Jerry Brown, and is trying to mobilize resources to help her school. "I am stunned. I thought that having Brown in office would create more opportunities and that we would get more funding, and things have been quite contrary. I want to do something about it. I am trying to put together a fund raising event to see if we can raise funds to save some of the arts programs."

When asked if she thought the Democrats could solve the problem she answered: "No we have to take this onto our hands and fight back to defend our livelihoods. We did not become educators just to be treated like this."

The centerpiece of Brown's budget proposal is a series of regressive taxes that try to make the working class pay for the financial crisis. They include an increase in the sales tax and vehicle license fees, which fall most heavily on the working class. Corporations and the wealthy are to be rewarded with \$2.9 billion in new tax breaks.

A recent poll by the Public Policy Institute of California shows that the majority of Californians oppose across the board income tax and sales tax increases, while 68 percent support increasing taxes on the wealthy. No layer of the political establishment has seriously proposed or sought to institute higher levies on the well-to-do.

Martha Adragna and her twin daughters, Melina and Madeleine, talked about the impact of the wars on financing for public services.

Melina said, “In our history classes we have seen graphs about the wars’ impact on public schools. Many kids have the same response as I do. It is a combination of being justifiably angry and befuddled because we do not know what is going on. What I know is that the war is taking money that should be going to schools. It is having a huge impact as far as the layoffs go.”

Martha added, “The wars are affecting all of us, not just the students. It is affecting all of us. Had these wars not occurred we would not be in the situation we are in right now. I think that all of us should join together to fight for policies that benefit us, not the Republicans and Democrats and Congress and all of that. It is our money, our taxes. Right now it is not about us, it is about them. Who did we give the money to when Obama took over? The banks.”

Precisely how to fight back was a topic of much discussion. Tenth-grade theater student Sandy, a student at Central High School said, “We need to protest. It takes a lot of people to make a difference. There has to be a movement that unites all students, at every high school. All the students have to put together their little bit of time and little bit of effort to save the teachers. At Hamilton High School there was a student walkout. Two thousand kids participated. The cuts and layoffs went through anyway, but the walkouts made a difference for the students and the teachers. They now know that the students really care about their teachers.”



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