New York City to lay off teachers, close fire companies, cut social programs

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9 May 2011

New York City's billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg last Friday announced $600 million in budget cuts for the city's Fiscal Year 2012, which will begin on July 1.

Bloomberg's $65.77 billion proposed budget, which, according to law, must be balanced and approved by the city council by June 30, includes the elimination of over 6,000 teaching positions in the public schools, plans to close 20 fire companies and cuts to youth programs, homeless services, elder-care programs, continuing education programs, libraries and cultural organizations.

Over $500 million dollars will be eliminated from the city's Department of Education. Out of the 6,166 teaching positions eliminated, 4,600 would be cut through the layoffs of teachers. The school system, the largest in the United States, has a million students and over 75,000 teachers.

The impact of teacher layoffs would be felt across all of New York's five boroughs. Hardest hit are 156 schools slated to lose at least 20 percent of their staff. The layoffs would go into effect when schools reopen in the fall of 2011.

For months, New York City's billionaire-in-chief has used the threat of teacher layoffs as a bludgeon to attack teachers' seniority rights. He has repeatedly called for elimination of so-called "last in, first out" provisions to pit younger teachers against older teachers and sponsored measures in the New York state legislature to base staff reductions on the preference of school authorities.

The budget cuts to the schools would affect class size, which would increase by an average of 2 or 3 students per class, and eliminate after-school programs, arts programs, sports and tutoring.

This frontal attack on public education is highlighted by the fact that Bloomberg will allocate an increase of $139 million to charter schools next year. Charters are funded publicly, but operated privately and often employ teachers at substandard wages without the job protections that teachers have in public schools.

The City University of New York (CUNY) has already lost $107 million in funding from New York State, including $12.3 million for community colleges. Bloomberg's budget will now cut an additional $63 million from community colleges. A variety of scholarship programs would also be cut. For the 2011-2012 fiscal year, CUNY's Board of Trustees has already requested a five-percent tuition hike.

The already dire conditions (see "Recordsetting homelessness in New York City") of the homeless in New York City will be made even more miserable by cuts to the Department of Homeless Services.

Rent subsidies to 15,000 formerly homeless families will be eliminated from the Advantage program. While many advocates for the homeless regard the program, which was designed to move families in shelters to affordable housing, as flawed, the city now has in place no plan at all to help families move into decent housing from the inadequate shelter system.

Programs to assist homeless runaway youth will be cut by $6 million. Another million will be cut from medical services in adult shelters.

Punishing cuts are being made across the board to city agencies and vital services.

With a budget gap of $55 million in the Fire Department of New York (FDNY), 20 fire companies are slated to be closed. The FDNY will also seek, according to Bloomberg's proposal, "to increase uniformed availability by 1.5 percent though controls on medical leave, light duty, and/or other leave."

Fire Commissioner Sal Cassano admitted that the cuts will mean that fire companies will not respond as quickly to fires. "The response time goes up; it takes us longer to get there to work the fires," he said. The inevitable result will be counted in lost lives.

The city's cultural infrastructure will also be dealt a blow, particularly in the library system. Citywide, libraries will lay off 530 workers, most of them librarians. Dozens of other positions will not be filled, including some at New York's flagship Research Library. It is likely that many branch libraries will reduce their hours.

The billionaire mayor's budget will also eliminate "non-essential food servings" to inmates in the city's jails, including condiments and servings of bread. Inmates will be charged an additional 10 cents per phone call.

In his Friday media presentation, Bloomberg blamed the city's budget cuts on cutbacks in state and federal aid, and, significantly, on rising pension costs for retired city workers. "This thought that 'Oh, the city has plenty of money, they can make up for anything' is just not realistic," he said.

Bloomberg's blaming the state for budget shortfalls is entirely hypocritical. He was a vocal supporter of Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo's repeal of the so-called millionaires tax, which imposed a small surcharge on state income tax of the top 2 percent. The elimination of this tax funnels nearly $5 billion back into the pockets of New York's wealthiest at the expense of drastic cuts to state funding for education and other services. Bloomberg is one of the biggest beneficiaries of this tax cut.

This transfer of wealth from the masses of working people to a narrow financial elite is being carried out under conditions in which New York City's financial sector is rolling in cash. Earlier this year, Wall Street firms such as JPMorgan Chase reported a 48 percent increase in profits over 2009 and a 47 percent increase for the fourth

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quarter of 2010 over the same period the previous year. JPMorgan netted a profit for 2010 of $17.4 billion. Citibank earned $10.6 billion in 2010. The five richest New Yorkers, including the mayor himself, have a combined net worth of $92 billion.•

This is a state of affairs that no wing of the establishment is prepared to challenge. The trade unions, allied with Democrats on the city council, have denounced the cuts and the increasing income inequality in the city. They have issued documents that highlight the perks given by the city to the banks and corporations, and even publicly called for making "the banks and millionaires pay their fair share."

But the whole political content of this slogan is based on a lie. The unions and their allies beg the mayor, and by inference his small class of super-rich, for a "fairer alternative," while posing no political alternative to the domination of two parties controlled by this financial elite.

On Saturday, United Federation of Teachers President Michael Mulgrew told a union gathering in response to the budget cuts, "Enough is enough." A moment later he warmly shook the hand of Bloomberg's schools chancellor Dennis Walcott.

The unions and the liberal Democrats will work to impose the layoffs and cuts as surely as their counterparts in Wisconsin did in March.

A genuine struggle against the budget cuts can waged only based upon the categorical rejection of the demand that working people pay for the economic crisis created by Wall Street and the profit system. Those who claim there is "no money" for schools, firehouses, the homeless and every other social need supported the transfer of trillions to the banks and finance houses in lower Manhattan. Bloomberg, who is implementing the cuts, could cover the entire budget deficit personally without touching 90 percent of his wealth.

The fight to defend basic rights to jobs, education, decent incomes, healthcare and other basic social needs requires that working people break free from the domination of the pro-big-business unions and build new organizations of working class struggle, including rank-and-file committees in the workplaces and neighborhood and action committees to organize all sections of workers and youth. This must be joined with a political break with the Democrats and Republicans, both of which parties represent the interests of the corporate elite.

The struggle against the budget cuts in New York City and across the country pit the vast majority of the population, working people, against the profit system and the domination of all aspects of society by a dictatorship of the banks and major corporations.

There exist ample resources to provide for quality education, decent healthcare and housing for all and all the other vital services that Bloomberg and his fellow financial oligarchs are demanding be cut. Funding them requires a sharp increase in taxes on corporate profits and the fortunes of this wealthy elite. The major banks and corporations must be taken out of the hands of billionaire investors and placed under the democratic control of society as a whole.

The only party fighting for this program in New York City and across the country is the Socialist Equality Party.

In coming weeks, the World Socialist Web Site will feature analysis of the full range of budget cuts and interviews with those affected by them.

The WSWS spoke to students at a two recent rallies against the cuts to education.

In Brooklyn, Brianna said, "I had to take a test to get into Brooklyn Tech. Now the classes are increasing in size. We can't get special attention from teachers. We are all supposed to be smart students and have to do all the work for ourselves. Next year, there will be 5,200 students in the school, a thousand freshmen.

"We heard the principal wants to cut liberal arts programs. Our school is known as a technical school but, for us, our major is law and society, not a technical course. Our Global Studies teacher is new. With the cuts he might be pushed into just being a substitute teacher."

"Teachers work hard," Brooklyn Tech student Promi said. "My teacher works late, after the students end at 3:00 until 6:00 in the evening. If they were to have online teaching, the benefits would not be that great. Experienced teachers have worked longer and are more committed, although some new teachers can be better."

Esther, a senior, at Brooklyn Tech said, "They have cut a lot of classes: wood shop, metal shop, AP Italian, AP Psychology, AP Biology Lab. Now you have to go online. You can't get lab in school. They have cut clubs and teams."

At a rally in Manhattan, Beacon High School student Frances told the WSWS, "I am here to rally against the budget cuts. We believe in public education. Laying-off 4,600 teachers will increase class sizes. It affects already damaged schools. There is less paper and fewer working computers. Teachers are forced to ask for parent donations more than before."

Tyra, also from Beacon, said, "They are making education a privilege, not a right. We lost teachers in Spanish and Chinese. French and Chinese programs were cut. Education is the first thing they feel should be cut. They just want charter schools."

Another Beacon student, Olivia, said, "The government is out of line. It does not have our best interests at heart or they would be taxing the rich. They will stay rich. These are human rights."

Maria Garcia, a mother of six, who lives on 146th St. in Harlem, said, "My daughter is in eleventh grade at Central Park High School. She was almost crying to me, 'They will cut some of my best teachers.' It is a good high school. The majority of the kids graduate. The social workers will work with the students. My daughter studies right away when she gets home before she sees friends. I am afraid she will get discouraged. I don't want her to leave school. Do they want kids on the street selling drugs?

"They are only thinking of Osama bin Laden. I was reading that Obama was cutting the budget for education too. I thought Obama was good for us, but it was a big mistake when I voted for him. I may not vote anymore. It's only about money."

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