

Teachers, parents and students protest school cuts in Yonkers, New York

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For two days in a row last week, hundreds of Yonkers teachers, students, parents and school staff turned out to protest massive budget cuts being proposed by the mayor and the school board.

Under the city/school budget, more than 400 teachers and over 300 other school employees were sent pink slips on May 13. Pre-kindergarten is going to be eliminated entirely, while kindergarten is to be cut back to half a day. Bus transportation for 65 percent of school students will be eliminated, and all extra-curricular activities including sports will be shut down. Moreover, the budget is calling for a 4.8 percent hike in the regressive property tax for the city.

The Yonkers cuts are representative of what is happening statewide. Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo's state budget cut \$1.3 billion from education while eliminating the so-called millionaires' surtax, putting \$5 billion back into the pockets of the top bankers and income earners.

The Cuomo budget aimed at cutting 5 percent of state funds from every school district. In Yonkers, the cut is 8 percent. Across the state, voters passed budgets in 634 of 678 school districts that voted on May 17. The average spending increase proposed by these school districts was 1.3 percent, the lowest in 15 years. The average property tax increase was 3.4 percent, not enough to compensate for the state cuts. These budgets were balanced with school program cuts, layoffs and concessions by teachers and school staff.

The New York State United Teachers union has said there will be 13,500 school employees laid off outside New York City. The Alliance for Quality Education sampled 120 of the state's 700 school districts and reported that 88 percent of the districts are laying off school staff like guidance counselors, librarians and aides, while 56 percent are terminating teachers.

As in New York City, just to its south, in Yonkers, there is no vote on the school budget. The Yonkers city charter

requires the budget be adopted by the City Council by June 1 to go into effect on July 1.

On May 2, the Yonkers Federation of Teachers (YFT) announced it would make \$3.3 million in concessions by amending the contract to alter teachers' daily work schedules. This was the YFT's response to the school board's demand that the unions hand over \$20 million in concessions to defray what was then described as a \$42.4 million budget deficit.

Later the same day, Yonkers Mayor Amicone posted a video on YouTube spelling out the city's demand that the teachers give up their pay increase this year and allow the city to default on paying into their welfare fund. This would amount to a \$13 million takeaway from the teachers. The mayor pitched the cuts as equal sacrifice with taxpayers and suggested they might reduce the number of layoffs.

The CSEA is the other major school union in Yonkers, and 238 of its members have received pink slips. The CSEA has said it wants to wait until the city budget is finalized to make its decision about concessions, as they are doing on the state level with Governor Cuomo's demands.

Last Tuesday evening, hundreds of protestors gathered outside city hall to demonstrate against these cuts, and about 800 people came to the school board meeting the following night at Saunders Trades and Technical High School. However, before those who had turned out could begin to voice opposition to the planned destruction of education in the city, they were forced to sit through more than an hour of a new charter school's pitch for guaranteed school funding.

Karly Quintero, a parent and a PTA vice-president, reacted angrily to this provocation. "I think the charter schools are an abomination with these budget cuts in place," she said. "The charter school funds will be preserved regardless of how deep the layoffs and cutbacks are for the rest of us. Our public schools are taking huge cuts, but the charters ask for and get the same amounts to pay for their needs."

Joanne Casella, an art teacher in a Yonkers middle school, was laid off initially in 2004. She spoke out against was happening to the arts: "At my school, 15 teachers have

gotten pink slips. When I started teaching art in the Yonkers school system in 1995, there were 75 art teachers in the system. That went up to 103 in 1999 or 2000. Now we are down to 34 art teachers for the whole system. At Robert C. Dodson Middle School, no student from Pre-K through the seventh grade has any art classes. I teach art only in the 8th grade. I had a student in 3rd grade last year who had his art work published on the cover of the NY state teachers' calendar. This year he has no art classes, and he won't have any next year either. Art is mandated by state law for half a year with 8th graders. So is music, but in my school I am giving full-year classes in art, and there is no music. This is illegal, but they are trying end these mandates, rather than make sure students have art instruction in school.

"I had students who were all city band and even all Westchester County band musicians last year. Now they have no band at all. When they take these classes away from the students, there is nothing to replace them. In some schools there is a substitute, but in some schools students are just left to sit in long study halls. There is also a problem that students cannot graduate because they cannot schedule all the classes that need to graduate on time. At Yonkers HS, they hold some study halls in the library because they don't have enough classrooms for them. Other students can't use the library now."

Erin Gorman, another teacher, said: "At my school, with 60 teachers, we are losing 17 to layoffs. This includes our guidance counselor and psychologists. I teach in what is considered a pretty good school, but with these disruptions of students' education, we have had to have ambulances brought in to deal with serious behavioral issues for the last three weeks. Next year, we are being told we will have to call 911 for such problems. The school has gotten a waiver for all the required services for special education students. This means that the students will only get what we already have, and these services have been cut already. A lot of Title 9 services for children from low-income families have been cut. So in our school with 1,100 students, we have no reading teachers. They are eliminating 22 reading teachers. We all teach reading, but the special reading teachers are able to give more expert attention to special ed students."

Elizabeth Valle is a graduate of Saunders HS who came back to oppose the cuts. She told the WSWs: "It is very upsetting that in the three or four years since I graduated from here, they have cut so much. The transportation cuts are very tough to live with. When I was going to elementary school, I lived on the other side of town. I couldn't have gotten to school with these cuts. I blame the big people in city hall for this. They decide how the money is distributed. Education has always been something that the politicians

have pushed to the side in favor of tax cuts for the rich or anything else."

Shirley Needham is a parent and a customer service worker who came to the Yonkers School Board meeting to oppose the cuts. She told the WSWs, "It is not fair cutting Pre-K, and not fair cutting kindergarten to a half day. Parents are going to lose their jobs if Pre-K is cut. What is the point of kids being in kindergarten for half a day from 8:30 until 12 noon? What can they learn in this time? Also what is the point of parents taking their kids to a half-day of school? The parents will lose their jobs again because what job is going to let you leave at 11:30 to pick your child up at school and take them to a daycare facility?"

"The transportation cuts are horrible. There are some children who don't go to a neighborhood school. Then you have some parents who don't drive or don't have a car. What are they supposed to do? Walk their kids to school for miles in the rain, sleet and snow?"

"I blame the city of Yonkers for this. If they have the money to build up the waterfront, why don't they have the money for education? I don't think working people are represented by the Democrats or Republicans. The only time you see them here is for elections. I think they represent the rich. They won't raise taxes for them, but they are raising taxes on the middle class. They shouldn't be doing this to just one class."



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