Thousands protest in New York City against budget cuts, layoffs

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17 June 2011

Tens of thousands of New York City public employees, teachers, private sector workers and students joined protests on Tuesday and Wednesday against impending budget cuts, mass layoffs and rising unemployment.

On June 14, city unions organized a mass rally outside City Hall, and on June 15 private sector unions joined with teachers and other public employees in a demonstration in Brooklyn, followed by a march across the Brooklyn Bridge into lower Manhattan. Among those marching were many out-of-work construction workers, including carpenters, ironworkers, laborers and others.

New York City's billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg has proposed $600 million in cuts that would go into effect for the next fiscal year, which begins this July 1. Hardest hit by the cuts are public schools, with the proposed elimination of over 6,000 teaching positions, which includes 4,000 layoffs.

The cuts are being carried out across the board. City community colleges face a cut of $63 million. Rent subsidies are to be eliminated for 15,000 formerly homeless families. Libraries are slated for 530 layoffs, mostly librarians. Twenty fire companies are targeted for shutdown. Cutbacks are also planned in senior centers, youth programs, homeless services, elder-care programs, continuing education programs and cultural organizations.

This draconian austerity program is being proposed under conditions in which major banks on Wall Street are making huge profits, and the five richest New Yorkers, including the mayor, have seen their combined personal fortunes grow to $92 billion.

The brutal character of the policies proposed by Bloomberg and the ever starker nature of New York City's gap between a wealthy financial elite—personified by the mayor—and masses of working people produced a substantial turnout at the rallies and an angry mood among those who attended.

The determination of the demonstrators to fight stood in stark contrast to the toothless policies and empty demagogy served up by the union bureaucrats and smattering of Democratic politicians, including Senator Charles Schumer, who addressed Tuesday's protest.

Most of what came from the platform consisted of one-line slogans such as "We are all New Yorkers," "We aren't going to take it anymore" and "Tax the rich." There were even a few shouted threats to "shut the city down," something that no one believes the union bureaucrats have any intention of doing.

While a number of speakers attacked Bloomberg, the main union organizing the rally, District Council 37 of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees, which represents 125,000 city workers, endorsed the billionaire for reelection in 2005 and has organized no struggle against his administration as it prepares sweeping attacks on workers and public services.

Noticeably absent from the remarks of the union officials was any mention of the name Andrew Cuomo, New York's Democratic governor, who together with Democrats and Republicans in the state legislature recently passed $10 billion in budget cuts that have translated into social cutbacks and layoffs in New York City and everywhere across the state.

The governor is threatening to begin laying off 9,800 state workers if they do not accept six-year contracts loaded with concessions, including increases in employee health care costs that, according to one estimate, would cost each worker a total of $10,000. The governor has also introduced to the state legislature an inferior pension plan for all new state employees

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that would, among other things, raise their retirement age and increase their pension contributions. The governor's proposal, backed by Bloomberg, would also affect city workers.

With Bloomberg's support, Cuomo pushed through the abolition of the so-called millionaires' tax, which imposed a small surcharge on the state's top 2 percent of income earners, transferring an estimated $5 billion from state revenues into the coffers of New York's wealthiest.

The silence on Cuomo is a reflection of the unions' subordination to the Democratic Party. On a state level, the union apparatus is collaborating with the Democratic governor in implementing the cutbacks, as in the case of the 1199 hospital workers union, which played a pivotal role on Cuomo's "Medicaid Redesign Team," which recommended $2.4 billion in Medicaid cuts statewide.

While feigning militancy at the rally outside City Hall, the unions were engaged behind closed doors in talks with the city on a scheme to use the employees' Health Insurance Stabilization funds to avert layoffs. The Bloomberg administration is demanding that it get $30 million a month from the fund in exchange for avoiding layoffs for a year. The fund, which now has a total of $500 million, was created in 1986 when the city agreed to contribute $35 million a month to help meet skyrocketing health care costs.

The Municipal Labor Council (MLC), a coalition of 90 civil services unions, had been seriously considering the proposal. As of Wednesday morning, however, member unions of the MLC had decided not to go along with the plan, with several of them pointing out that, after a year of burning through their funds, the city would seek to impose the same layoffs. In fact, the municipal unions agreed to such a transfer of funds a few years ago, achieving only a postponement of impending layoffs.

The *New York Daily News* reported that the leaders of the teachers and firefighters unions, which face mass layoffs and the closure of firehouses, strongly favor the idea. However, other unions facing fewer layoffs opposed it. Harry Nespoli, the chairman of the MLC and the head of the sanitation union, stated that he will continue to negotiate and try to come to some agreement involving a union-funded bailout with city hall.

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