

New York workers speak out against attacks on jobs and services

A reporting team
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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of workers who came to the June 14 rally in New York City to oppose the cutbacks proposed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Governor Andrew Cuomo.

Lawrence Sanders, a state employee who works at the New York State Psychiatric Institute in New York City, came to the demonstration with a contingent of his co-workers. He said: "They want us to pay more for our health care. This is [Governor] Cuomo who is demanding the cuts. I think Cuomo's threat to lay off 9,800 state workers is bad. They're the ones who messed up the economic situation; it was not the working people. But they want us to pay for it.

"There is no politician, Democrat or Republican, for working people to support. First it was Paterson, now it is another Democrat, Cuomo, cutting us. To me they are all the same. They are all making budget cuts. What is going to happen to young workers if they are cutting health care and retirement pensions today?

"I haven't seen the latest details of what the governor is demanding from us, but I am not willing to give up anything. In fact, I want a raise because the price of everything is going up.

"My pension fund lost a lot of money in the Wall Street crash. I paid into it for a long time, and I lost a lot of money. And I am not the only one. I think the bankers and the CEOs should be paying everything back. They should be paying it back in taxes. I don't know how they are not. It seems like they are laughing at us.

"I think the working class should shut this city down. People should come out in numbers like this and even bigger and shut it down completely. As far as I am concerned the unions are not doing that good of a job. There should be some new leadership in the unions. I work in a psychiatric research institute. There are only about 150 of us left there. There used to be many more, but whenever someone retires or leaves, they don't hire a

replacement. It seems like they just want to get rid of us.

"I was in Iraq and risked my life there. But now I can't go to the VA [Veterans Administration] to get my teeth fixed. I think everyone should have the right to health care. This is necessary to stop people from dying younger."

Rhonda Hines, a worker with 21 years service at the Brooklyn Central Laundry, came to the rally to oppose the shutdown of the facility, which is scheduled for August. All the jobs are to be privatized as part of the city budget cuts. She told the WWS: "They are privatizing the laundry, and it is very scary to me. They are saying they will close it down August 1, and they will redeploy us. But there is no guarantee they will redeploy us.

"They are cutting the hospital staffs, and they are saying they are going to redeploy them first. My boss says it doesn't look good. Even if they were to redeploy us sometime soon, it will not be a great situation. Many workers have been at the laundry for 20 or 30 years. Many don't have much education or many other skills. It will be difficult to retrain.

"What we do every day is not easy work. I have 800 lab coats come in, and I have to get them out in one day. There are also 500 or 600 doctors' smocks to do. It is hot in there. When it is 90 degrees outside, it is 120 degrees inside. We just drink water and keep working.

"I blame Bloomberg for what is happening now. He has money, and he doesn't care that we have to work hard and struggle to put food on our tables. He just wants to tax, lay off, cut and privatize the poor people. We are the backbone of the city and the people who keep New York running.

"They need to go after the rich. They are the ones who are making it difficult for us. They feel they can do what they want with us. Now they are raising the retirement age. Are we going to work until we are dead? I am so busy working, and they are so busy taking."

Jodi Gang is a teacher from District 21 with 19 years service. She came with a march in Brooklyn that crossed the Brooklyn Bridge in the rain. She explained, “I am an ATR, which means an Absentee Teacher Reserve. This is a teacher who has been forced to lose her job through excess or some other reason, and the DOE [Department of Education] sends you to another school as a substitute.

“There are about 2,000 ATRs in the city now, and there will be more. With the budget cuts and Bloomberg wanting more children going to charter schools, the population and teacher ratio on which schools get apportioned their money could be pushed toward excess, and they will force more teachers onto the ATR rolls. We cost a lot on the school books. They are trying to force us out.”

Jodi’s friend Pearl Voulkidis, who has 13 years as a city teacher, observed: “I am a reading teacher who they say is not needed; so they made me an ATR. I’ve been an ATR for four years now, and it is like being a glorified substitute teacher. But how can they say they don’t need reading teachers when the Regents Board has just announced that 80 percent of city high school students are not qualified for college work because they cannot get an 80 on the Math regents and 75 on the English regents? Bloomberg also says we don’t work. I have 11 different classes and over 200 students this year.

“My principal has given me AIS classes, which are Academic Intervention Services. But the mayor doesn’t think that this is necessary anymore, and I have to worry whether I have a job this fall. Bloomberg and Obama tell young children that they will have the world in their hands if they value education and pursue it. I have a BA and two Master’s degrees. Where is the value of education here? But I warn them, I’m not going down without a fight.”

Dellessandro Warren works in the food service division of Department of Education. She commented: “I started back in the 1990s, and since then they have cut back drastically in food service. When I started there were eight workers on a shift. Now there are four. Then they figured there would be 100 students per worker. Now it is 150 students per worker. These are the numbers in all the schools. Students need the breakfasts and lunches we serve. It is very important that we serve these meals because these children might go hungry without them. If they don’t eat, how can they learn?

“Before there was a full staff, including a cook to cover a lunch period. Now it is half the staff with cooks having to do as much and more. She has to cook, serve and then

make sure the inventory book is in order. When someone is out sick, we don’t get a replacement, we have to take up the slack and pull the whole load. Right now, cooks are retiring, and they are not hiring anyone to replace them.”

Alice Sturm-Sutter just retired in December from the North Central Bronx Hospital HIV Clinic as a nurse practitioner. She said, “Right now the budget is being cut across the board by a certain percent for all of the city agencies. All of the city workers are worried because they are constantly under this threat of who is going to be cut, how many are going to be cut, and when are they going to make the cuts. This includes the nurses, nursing staff and administrators at my hospital and clinic, and all health care workers.

“The social service workers are being cut. We lost two at our clinic, and we kept having to apply for more grants. We do the best we can, but our case managers are so overworked. You can’t really provide quality health care in our hospitals and clinics because you can’t solve the problems outside the hospitals in society starting without a job, poverty or a place to live. Then people develop health problems like depression and the inability to hold things together psychologically. When people have these conditions you need a team to treat them. The dedicated care managers are under more and more stress to meet these needs, which you just can’t.

“Some people have left because we are so short staffed and underpaid. We get paid less than in the private sector. We have lost a lot of people, but they cannot hire any more people because there is a hiring freeze. I retired in December before this round of budget cuts by Bloomberg and Cuomo got under way. Right now our hospital is hysterical about charging people and making sure they get payment. It used to be you could treat a patient if they didn’t have money or insurance. Now if they don’t have insurance they have to negotiate with the caseworker on a payment arrangement.

“They are trying to do more HIV testing, but they don’t have the necessary social services network to really follow up. It is Bloomberg, Cuomo and the federal government who are all cutting funds for HIV services.”



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