

California's March 5 "Day of Action" draws over 10,000 students

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The California State Capitol Building in Sacramento was the scene of a series of demonstrations Monday against further tuition fee hikes, budget cuts and privatization at the state's public universities. The peaceful student demonstrators were met with a large police presence of several hundred officers in full riot gear from the California Highway Patrol, the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department and the Sacramento City Police Department.

Some 76 protesters were arrested for refusing to leave the capitol building after it closed at 6 pm. They were later released.

Students and university workers have gathered regularly at the state capitol in recent years to protest skyrocketing tuition, cuts and furloughs, but this year's demonstration was noticeably larger than previous protests—perhaps due to recent displays of police brutality at University of California (UC) Davis, UC Berkeley, California State University (CSU) Long Beach, and UC Riverside.

The protests come in the midst of a profound crisis in the state's higher education system. Since 2009, Democrats and Republicans have worked together to slash over \$2 billion in funding for the UC and CSU systems. The California Community College (CCC) system has lost another \$700 million. Tuition has increased by 300 percent in the past decade, and roughly 70 percent since 2008.

Students are once again under attack this year, faced with the Democratic governor Jerry Brown's budget proposal for the 2012-13 fiscal year. Brown recommends slashing funding for higher education by billions of dollars in the event that his regressive taxation plan fails to gain the support of voters in November.

The tax plan includes a 1 percent increase in income

taxes on those earning over \$500,000, as well as a $\frac{1}{2}$ percent increase in the state's sales tax. The sales tax increase would hit working people the hardest and will account for 1/3 of the revenue generated by Brown's tax proposal. In other words, Brown has given the population an unacceptable choice: they can either vote to raise their own taxes, or see funding for vital state services wiped out.

Furthermore, students are demonstrating against a proposed increase in the qualification ceiling for the Cal Grants program. Cal Grants helps offset the increased cost of college tuition for working class students and their families. By increasing the ceiling, Brown will cut Cal Grant access for 40 percent of California's working class private university students. With public university tuition having tripled in the past decade, private universities often provide a more affordable option for many working class students.

The day's events began as demonstrators from the San Francisco area concluded the "99 Mile March for Education and Social Justice." The march, organized by the Occupy Education coalition, began on March 1.

A variety of unions organized a larger rally that took place later in the day. Over 10,000 students from a range of campuses arrived to protest Brown's budget, but at the behest of the union officials who organized the speaker schedule, demonstrators were forced to listen to a series of speeches by the very Democratic Party politicians who support draconian cuts to higher education.

Speakers included Democratic Party bigwigs Assembly Speaker John Perez (D-Los Angeles) and Lt. Governor Gavin Newsom. Both speakers claimed to support increased funding for higher education, but the record shows otherwise.

Speaker Perez voted in favor of the 2009-10 state

budget and May Revision, which cut unprecedented amounts of money from higher education. The cuts forced historically unparalleled hikes in tuition, forced thousands of students out of college and drastically increased the debt loads of those who remained enrolled.

The 2009-10 budget forced cuts of over \$1 billion to the University of California and California State University systems combined. It reduced grants to over 100,000 low- and middle-income students and forced the California Community College system to slash enrollment by tens of thousands of students. Following the passage of that budget, UC, CSU and CCC implemented heavy fee increases to offset the cuts.

Perez also voted for Gov. Brown's 2011-12 budget, which included a shocking 16.4 percent cut to the University of California. As a recent UC statement highlighted, student tuition surpassed state funding as the largest revenue base for the university's operating budget for the first time in UC's 143-year history. All in all, \$500 million was slashed from UC, \$500 million from CSU and \$400 million from CCC. Further fee hikes were imposed upon students, prompting widespread student protests.

In light of this, the claims by Speaker Perez and the rest of the Democratic Party apparatus to be defenders of higher education are outright deception. Thousands of students have been forced out of an education and into debt in the wake of their brutal budgetary measures.

The WSWS spoke to student demonstrators at the capitol in Sacramento.

Mackenzie, pointing at the hundreds of riot police stationed outside the capitol building, explained that "Governor Brown called these [police officers] here. It is an issue that we're spending this much on police, and nothing on making my tuition cheaper!"

"Obama said that in three years we would have change," Mackenzie said. "And look—now we're rioting. I say we're entitled to the right to a new government... to revolt."

A Sacramento City College Student, Dylan, participated in the demonstration and highlighted his frustration with both big business parties.

"I stay away from both parties. They're cutting funding from the wrong things. We need equality. We need to share."

Students were not the only contingency at the capitol on Monday. Ivan, a worker from Sacramento, sympathized not only with California students, but with workers around the world facing similar austerity measures.

"[Austerity] is not only in the US, it's around the world," he said, underlining the international nature of the current crisis in capitalism.

But Ivan also expressed frustration with Monday's demonstration, with the rally called by the unions, and with the Occupy movement in general.

"We need more radical change in this country. You can't just talk about greedy corporations and banks—you need to talk about ending capitalism. Occupy is not enough."



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