

More than 20,000 California teachers receive preliminary layoff notices

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On March 15, California schools handed out 20,000 layoff notices to teachers, librarians and other employees in school districts across the state. California schools are required by state law to notify those teachers who may be sacked by mid-March based on anticipated income and school enrollment. Whether or not those teachers are actually laid off is based on actual revenues. Meanwhile, school districts are anticipating and preparing for another round of mid-year budget cuts.

Barring voter approval of higher sales and income taxes this November, public schools (from kindergarten through the 12th grade) will face budget cuts of U\$4.8 billion, more than half the \$9.2 billion in projected cuts that would affect virtually every state program, including programs originally earmarked by former Republican governor Arnold Schwarzenegger that had been rejected by the legislature.

Beginning in 2008, the issuance of layoff notices for teachers and school employees—so-called pink slips—on the “ides of March” has become routine. Up until now, most of the layoffs were rescinded in time for the new school year. This year, however, there is a lot more uncertainty. California’s 2013 fiscal year begins on July 1, and the school year begins on September 1. This means that for the first two months of the school year, districts will not know whether the education budget will be short by \$4.8 billion.

School districts stand to lose \$807 per student and would have to drastically slash their budgets, with a combination of sackings, a shorter school year, and pay cuts. The Education Coalition, a group closely tied to the teachers’ unions, estimates that such a drastic cut is the equivalent of 55,000 layoffs or 17 lost school days.

In past years, school districts, in collusion with the unions that represent teachers, have been able to force

wage and benefit concessions from teachers and school employees in return for fewer layoffs. At best, this is just an illusory solution.

Adding to the uncertainty is the lack of consensus on what the actual deficit will be in 2012/2013.

Governor Jerry Brown initially estimated a deficit of \$3.1 billion. State Assembly budget officials now estimate a deficit in the \$5 to \$8 billion range. Other estimates are less optimistic, with estimates as high as \$13 billion. Last November, Brown said that lower-than-expected state revenues in 2011/2012 will certainly mean deeper budget cuts for the 2013 fiscal year. This February, the state’s legislative policy analyst indicated that Brown might be overestimating State revenues by \$6.5 billion through June 2013.

The 2013 budget of \$137 billion includes a \$92.6 billion general fund, \$39 billion in special funds, such as transportation, that cannot be spent on other items, and \$5 billion bond funds. School spending is the largest item in the general fund. Relative to the size of the gross state product, the current state general fund is lower than it was in 1975.

As September draws nearer, school districts are responding in different ways, either by draconian cuts, or by looking for sources of revenue that are independent of the state. The Oakland School District avoided layoff notices by both eliminating adult education and cutting other programs.

For the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), Adult Education, Early Education and the Elementary School Art Program are on the chopping block and now depend for their survival on passage of a so-called parcel tax—an increase of \$298 on property taxes—that must be approved by two thirds of the voters in November. The measure is expected to generate \$255 million, roughly half of its deficit for 2013. Since

2008, the LAUSD has been hit with \$2.3 billion in cuts.

On March 15, the LAUSD handed out 11,700 preliminary layoff notices, more than half of the state's total. Nine thousand of the layoff notices were to teachers. In comparison, last year, the LAUSD sent out only 7,500 preliminary notices.

While teachers have protested in Sacramento, San Francisco and Los Angeles, their numbers have been purposely kept small by the unions that represent them. One of the largest protests in Los Angeles involved about 1,000 adult school instructors. Instead, the unions are working with Governor Brown to pass his tax proposal.

The proposal would raise the state's regressive sales tax by 0.25 percent and income taxes on wealthier citizens by 1 to 3 percent. Taxes on those earning \$500,000 or more would be increased by 3 percentage points, those earning over \$300,000 would pay 2 percent more and those earning over \$250,000, 1 percentage point.

Using the pretext that competing tax proposals will confuse voters and split the pro-tax vote, Brown has sought to sabotage any competing tax proposal, particularly a "millionaires tax" that would raise income taxes by 5 percentage points on those Californians with annual incomes exceeding \$2,000,000 and 3 percentage points on those with annual incomes exceeding \$1,000,000. Sixty percent of those funds would go to public education, the balance to social services for seniors and children and to public safety and infrastructure.

Although the proposal is utterly inadequate to address the economic crisis, polls have shown that this initiative would be far more popular than the governor's.

Brown motivated his proposal saying that it would share the sacrifice among rich, middle class, and poor Californians, ignoring that over the last 30 years the wealthiest 1 percent have seen their income increase by 81 percent, while the poorest 20 percent of Californians have lost 11.5 percent. Moreover, there is every reason to anticipate that, by November, regressive taxes will be raised while income tax on the wealthy will be attenuated by a number of loopholes sanctioned by both big business parties.

Specifically, the governor's goal is to forge a business-union coalition to significantly reduce teacher and public employee pensions in return for modest

increases on taxes on the wealthy. The California Teachers Association (CTA) and its AFL-CIO counterpart, the California Federation of Teachers (CFT), are on board, as are many big businesses.

The CTA and those unions supporting the governor argue that the second initiative would not have as much business opposition as the former. There is little doubt that the final plan would be a combination of income and sales taxes that, in conjunction with the slashing of public employee pensions, would usher in support from Chevron, PG&E, Wells Fargo Bank, and other California big businesses and weigh disproportionately on working families. The governor would then require that the CTA and other unions aggressively sell this agreement to their own members and California workers.

Meanwhile, rank and file teachers have been collecting signatures for the "millionaires tax" initiative and joining parents and students in other parts of this state to protest this fourth year of layoffs. In the Bay Area city of San Leandro, protesting parents and teachers last week pointed out that the district has eliminated 14 percent of its teachers since 2008. Three San Leandro students held a weeklong hunger strike to protest the layoffs. In San Diego, chanting "save our teachers" and "we can't learn if they can't teach," hundreds of students walked out of Mission High School to defend their teachers.

Mission High School serves a working class population. Many of the students themselves have parents who are unemployed. San Diego alone handed out 1,600 preliminary layoff notices—nearly 20 percent of the district's teachers.



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