# Police pepper spray students protesting tuition hikes in California

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On Tuesday, dozens of students were pepper sprayed by campus police at Santa Monica College while protesting outside a Board of Trustees meeting.

At least two people were hospitalized and several others injured when a crowd of 100 people tried to enter the room where the meeting was being held. Students were opposed to plans for a two-tier tuition scheme, whereby the college will charge students triple for popular courses that fill up quickly.

Videos posted on the internet showed a crowd of students gathered outside the meeting room chanting, “Let us in!” and “Shame on you!”

The campus police refused to let them in during the public comments section, saying the room was at capacity. An overflow room was set up but could not accommodate the number of people there. When students demanded a larger room, this request was denied.

Students said that pepper spray was used without any warning. “There is no way to justify this behavior by police officers,” Kayleigh Wade, a 19 year old Santa Monica College student and victim of the pepper spraying incident, said at a news conference on Wednesday.

Parker, a first year political science student at Santa Monica, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The real problem is that our state has chosen not to make education a priority. Santa Monica City College is implementing a two-tier system that would exclude a lot of students. Many students come here because it's an education they can afford.

“A month ago the trustees held a meeting where there was a motion to support ‘contract education’ [the proposed tuition hikes] but the student trustee raised a motion to postpone a vote. There was a lot of confusion, and no one really knew what exactly was decided. Between then and last night the trustees decided to support contract education, and it really felt like they simply ignored everything the students wanted to say.

“There's been a lot of police for the past month watching the student organizing committee. The police weren't letting many people into the meeting because the room was too small. It would have been a lot safer to just let us into the room, but they were only letting 20 or so students in.

“Things started to escalate and the police were trying to keep people out while we just wanted to get in. It was packed in tight around the door and the police claimed students were breaking into the room so out came their pepper spray and batons. After that the fire alarm was pulled to evacuate the building because the pepper spray was so strong.”

No arrests have been made of the campus police. In an attempt to assuage public anger, at the end of the meeting Board Chair Margaret Quinones Perez said the school would pay for all medical expenses for students injured during the demonstration. By the next day, however, school authorities were forced to launch an investigation into the incident.

Santa Monica College President Chui Tsang defended the attack in a statement issued Wednesday. The use of force was necessary, Tsang said, “to preserve public and personal safety”. “Unfortunately, a number of bystanders, including college staff, students and other police personnel, were affected,” his statement said. “Although a number of participants at the meeting engaged in unlawful conduct, Santa Monica College police personnel exercised restraint and made no arrests.”

The incident at Santa Monica College recalled the police brutality seen at the University of California,

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Davis last fall, when a campus police officer pepper-sprayed a group of non-violent students who were engaged in a sit-down. That episode was condemned by many around the world and acted as a rallying point for student demonstrations in solidarity with the Occupy Wall Street movement.

The tuition scheme at Santa Monica, the first of its kind in the country, will charge students $180 per unit, up from $46 per unit. This would mean a three unit course, in Math or English for example, would cost students at least $540, more than they currently pay for an entire semester of coursework.

Students rightly fear that this will create a two-tier campus, where wealthy students can get by but students from a working class or poor background will effectively be priced out of a higher education altogether. The two-tier scheme is being closely watched by other campuses across the country that are also dealing with massive budget cuts and shrinking state and federal funds.

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