

Thousands rally against education cuts in Portland, Oregon

Our reporters
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An estimated 4,000 students, teachers, and parents marched and rallied May 11 to protest cuts at the Portland, Oregon public schools. The protest organized by a local group called UPSET (Underfunded Parents, Students & Educators Together) started in the Rose Garden and ended downtown at Pioneer Courthouse Square.

The demonstration was held in advance of a meeting of the Portland Public Schools board, which has threatened to carry out savage cuts, including the elimination of 110 teaching positions next year.

The day before the march the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) union voted to make \$2.65 million in concessions. Part of the concession proposal includes a six-month freeze on step pay increases for teachers, three unpaid furlough days for principals and ten such days for office administrators.

Claiming the concessions would prevent the layoffs, the union reopened the current contract—which was not due to expire until June 2013. The school board is expected to approve the proposal this week.

In addition to the givebacks, Portland Mayor Sam Adams has pledged \$5 million to be requisitioned from other as yet unnamed city programs.

A local columnist for *The Oregonian* newspaper presented the deal as a sign that “civic leaders and union officials have apparently gotten word that Portland-area parents are fed up with the relentless slashing of school services and budgets.” In fact, the last-minute deal will not stop the continuous cutting of educational budgets, which have become steeper since the onset of the economic meltdown.

Prior to the march, UPSET sent out an email asking participants to “promote only the UPSET message with signs, chants and speech.” The group said it limited its demands to “no more cuts to education,” and

specifically would not take a position on the “school boards’ policies and decisions,” NCLB (No Child Left Behind) and education reform.”

This effort to block criticism of the forces attacking public education goes hand in hand with the group’s naïve claim that the answer is writing letters to state legislators in Salem.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Students for Social Equality distributed a leaflet calling for the political mobilization of the working class to defend public education. This requires a fight against the Obama administration and both big business parties, which are slashing trillions from social spending on behalf of the corporate and financial elite.

The WSWWS spoke with Michael, a Portland city worker. “I’m here because I don’t favor cuts to education or public cuts in general. The transportation bureau is facing a 15 percent cut this year. For PPS [Portland Public Schools] they are cutting the Outdoor Education Program. It is an excellent program.”

Asked what he thought of the election Michael said, “I’m just sick of it. I’m disappointed with Obama. He was handed a bag of crap and I didn’t expect a whole lot from him. The way the elections are funded the public voice is not heard. Capitalism’s flaws are coming out.”

Olivia is an 8th grade student at Da Vinci Middle School, which has an arts focus. As with many schools in the district, cuts have been harsh, and parents, teachers and students hold almost constant fundraisers to try to keep programs going. “They are trying to cut the arts program at Da Vinci. I’m leaving next year but the cuts will impact other students. I think the program is really important. I was lucky to get in but now they are cutting 25 percent of the program’s funding. They have had the same amount of teachers and my first two

years were good but now we are trying to raise \$200,000 to cover the cuts. So far we have raised \$80,000 with donations, a couple of concerts and other events.”

Matthew Carlson is an arts teacher at Grant High School, one of the area schools where students walked out to protest budget cuts on May Day. “This is my first year at Grant and I have been working part-time. If I were offered a full-time position, I would take it. If they cut the arts and students don’t see it as a viable career they won’t pursue an education. We live in a visual and creative society and I would like to see more funding for arts and that it is seen as a career.”

Sam and Julie moved to Portland recently after finishing graduate school. Julie said, “I understand the large student debt and not having many opportunities. A lot of us are underemployed. On the news today they said J.P. Morgan lost \$2 billion and now they are worried that the credit markets will freeze.”

Colin, a student at Grant High School, said, “Our school was losing 11 teachers and I didn’t want that to happen. I just know that things are being cut, and I don’t like that.”

Elias is a senior at David Douglas High School. Andrew is a student at Portland Community College, part of Oregon’s community college system, which has seen a decline in funding of \$100 million over the last two years.

Elias said, “I’m here because every student has the right to an education. I’m in the jazz program at David Douglas and I really don’t want to see those programs cut.”

Andrew added, “Children younger than us should have the same educational opportunity.”



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