

California austerity: Student assistant jobs on the chopping block

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As part of Governor Jerry Brown's budget cuts, the state of California will lay off approximately 1,600 student workers at the end of August. These students are employed around the state as part-time assistants. Their activity is mostly technical, secretarial and research work for state offices. Their public employee counterparts, members of the SEIU and other public unions, will see wage and hour cuts.

The state expects to save \$13.4 million by firing the students. The Brown administration also plans to lay off retired state employees who have returned to work. The elimination of retirees could save \$110 million. The bulk of the anticipated savings of \$839 million from state worker cuts would be extracted from employee furloughs.

Student assistant work hours are flexible and are designed to fit around a changing class schedule. They are not covered by collective bargaining agreements and do not receive benefits. Student assistant jobs have been seen as something akin to an internship, providing valuable experience to college students seeking a future job upon graduation.

For most of these student assistants, their jobs with the state paying about \$8,500 a year are integral to their ability to remain enrolled in college. Most of the students are enrolled in the state university system, where tuition has increased 383 percent in the last decade due to budget cuts. Further tuition increases are likely to take place in fall 2012.

The cuts come just as the new school year is beginning, leaving students in greater financial insecurity, posing the necessity of finding jobs elsewhere and of taking out more loans.

The youth unemployment rate in California, nearly 20 percent, will make finding a new job increasingly difficult for laid-off students. This is on top of an ever

increasing student loan debt burden, which has surpassed \$1 trillion in the US.

The destruction of the student assistant positions is part of a much broader austerity policy being carried out by the Democratic-run government in California, along with its counterparts in other states and at the federal level.

In his budget proposal for the upcoming fiscal year, Brown outlined billions in cuts, including from kindergarten to university level education, along with a continued shredding of what remains of the social safety net in California. Moreover, should voters not approve Brown's regressive sales tax proposition on the November ballot—a measure that weighs disproportionately on working families—this will be used as an excuse to slash far more from the budget.

SEIU leaders specifically pushed for the firing of all student assistants by September 1, arguing that it was “unreasonable” to have students performing jobs that could be done by SEIU members. This is a lie, designed to pit student workers against their senior counterparts. In reality, student workers complement their senior co-workers. This was pointed out by Senior Hazardous Substance Scientist David Miller, president of the state's scientists' union, in a letter of protest addressed to Julie Chapman, the state official in charge of human resources. Miller pointed out that students often handle routine tasks, freeing up technical workers for jobs that demand their special skills.

In fact, the SEIU is not proposing that more regular workers be hired to replace the sacked assistants and retirees. Indeed, it has agreed to a provision that will have public employees work nearly 2.5 weeks less a year, a wage cut of 4.8 percent. The firing of the students will surely impose speed-up conditions on public employees, who will have to do more for less

pay, in less time.

The SEIU is intimately tied to the Democratic Party, supporting Brown's election campaign and his budget proposals. The Local 1000 political action committee gave out over \$300,000 to the Democratic Party in 2011 alone, a non-election year. In every step of the attack on state workers, the SEIU has worked hand in hand with the California government to impose pay cuts, furlough days and work week reductions.

Yvonne Walker, Local 1000 president, stands out in particular for her role in promoting Brown, for example proposing the four day work week, and covering her tracks by declaring that the union must keep a "seat at the table." By cynically pitting workers and students against each other, the union is only following the well-worn path of class collaboration it has already laid down.

The SEIU, along with the other trade unions, are the medium most favored by the Democratic Party for driving down wages, ripping up contracts, and gutting public education. In exchange for their unflagging support, the Democrats allow union leaders to absorb 6-figure salaries and to manage the unions as the primary instrument for attacking the working class in those industries where they are still dominant.

The strategy of the Democrats in California takes its cue from the policies of the Obama administration on the national level, from the bailout and restructuring of General Motors carried out with the support of the United Auto Workers, to the administration's support for mass layoffs of teachers in Rhode Island, to the fraudulent "race to the top" merit-based scheme for allocating education funds.



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