

Newark, New Jersey students protest education cuts

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Hundreds of high school students in Newark, New Jersey walked out of class Tuesday to protest millions of dollars in education cuts. Republican governor Chris Christie's proposed 2014 budget would underfund Newark schools by more than \$50 million relative to the state's established funding formula. Students foresee the cuts translating into more teacher layoffs, resource shortages and elimination of extra-curricular activities.

"These cutbacks are simply horrible, and they should not be happening anywhere," said Aaliyaa, a student at Science Park High School. "They want to privatize education and that is not right. They are closing schools while there are millionaires and billionaires who have much more money than they need."

Students from at least six schools gathered shortly after noon Tuesday outside of Rutgers Law School, where a committee of the state Assembly held budget hearings. In attending the demonstration, the students defied threats of suspension from school administrators. At least two high schools were placed on "lock down," blocking all exits and restricting movement throughout the building. This tactic, typically associated with prisons in the midst of rioting, was aimed at denying students freedom of assembly. Similar measures, along with retributions afterwards, were taken during a 2010 student walkout in Newark and elsewhere in the state. At the time Governor Christie proposed \$820 million in statewide education cuts.

Since then the drive to defund and dismantle the public education system has only intensified. In 2011, the state of New Jersey, which has controlled the Newark school district for 18 years (through both Democratic and Republican administrations), installed a new superintendent, Cami Anderson, to spearhead so-called reform. Newark is one of four cities in New

Jersey to have the state takeover their school system. Camden was added to the list last month.

Anderson's role in Newark—to privatize public education through the rapid expansion of charters and drive back the working conditions of teachers—immediately became clear. Within a year, seven of Newark's schools, nearly 10 percent of the total, were shuttered. Last November the school board, with the aid of the Newark Teachers Union, pushed through a contract that links teacher pay to a dubious rating system and facilitates the firing of higher paid veteran teachers. This policy is aided by the \$100 million donation by Facebook billionaire Mark Zuckerberg, which pays for bonuses for highly ranked teachers.

The offensive against public education is supported by both big business parties throughout all levels of government from President Obama on down. Newark mayor Cory Booker, a rising star within the Democratic Party, has been an outspoken supporter of Christie's efforts to expand charters and link teacher evaluations to testing. Cami Anderson even served as Booker's director of policy during his mayoral campaign.

Meanwhile the conditions under which Newark students live and study has continued to deteriorate. Newark, New Jersey's largest city, has long been one of the most impoverished. Since 2008 financial crash, the magnitude of social devastation has increased even more. By 2011, an estimated 44 percent of children were classified as living in poverty.

The overwhelming majority of public school students, upwards of 85 percent, qualify for free school lunches. Over four years, the official unemployment rate for Newark residents nearly doubled to over 20 percent. Real unemployment is far higher. Over the last decade more than 3,000 manufacturing jobs were

eliminated. To the extent that they've been replaced, it has been with largely low paying retail sector jobs. The terrible social conditions in the city are inextricably linked to the city's low graduation rates, near 55 percent.

Karigd, a junior at Central High School, described the impact of the budget cuts to the *World Socialist Web Site*. "One result is that teachers will lose their jobs, and the teachers have families to support. We students love our teachers. Everybody came to the protest for different reasons in the sense that each school is confronted with its own type of cutbacks. We are fighting against all the cutbacks in our society.

"They don't have the right to cut the budgets and jobs. Instead they should create more programs and more jobs. The rich are trying to take advantage of people. They already have what they want, but they are trying to make even more."

"I am here despite the fact that I might get suspended for walking out," said Aaliyaa, from Science Park High School. "The Assistant Superintendent came into our school just five minutes before the walkout. There were multiple announcements on the school public announcement system that there will be consequences for a walkout."

Referring to the deep social inequality in America, she added, "These people have an overabundance of wealth and should pay more. The cuts will hurt students all over the state, and the country. It is not fair. The top 100 people make more money than the entire middle class in this country. The politicians are being lobbied for war and now to make the rich even richer, and then the politicians vote for the interests of the rich. Everything is focused on how to make people with money to make earn even more money. That is capitalism."

Raihaanah, a freshman at University High, said she walked out "because they are trying to take away our sports and recreational things. Money is already low. They are cutting my Sister-To-Sister Club. It supports students and raises money for the school. They do it to make more charter schools. I hope they listen to us. We will go down fighting.

"I don't think it is right the way the government approaches it," she said. "They are cutting schools but keep selling lottery tickets. They should cut the lottery because it is gambling, but the money should go to the

schools. There is a lack of common sense by the government. We all know it is wrong."

Llyahsa added, "Why would they cut schools? A lot of people play basketball and have the dream of going to college. They need scholarships. Why cut that? They don't care. They just care about anyway to make money. They would leave us impoverished."

Another Newark high school student, Shirelle, discussed the motivation for the cuts. "Christie bailed out the big corporations located in New Jersey, like Prudential. So they support him. They are putting business before education."

Jose from Science Park added, "Our principal told us at the beginning of the school day, there would be consequences, that students would get suspended. But we believe in what we are doing and walked out. We are not products. They are trying to privatize and turn public education into a business. The way they are trying to 'fix' the poorer schools, like Eastside and Westside, is to close them down. They are just trying to bring in charter schools. In actual reality, the statistics are there are more failing charters than good charter schools. I don't know if this will work but if you want to make a change, then look at history. In Flint, Michigan during the Depression the workers at General Motors united. This showed if you get together you can change things."



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