New York governor proposes $4 million cut to public libraries

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On February 26, library workers and their supporters from around New York State (NYS) descended on the state capital of Albany as part of the New York Library Association's annual Library Advocacy Day. The association and various trade unions use the day to promote the illusion that lobbying various Democratic and Republican state legislators will restore cuts annually proposed by the governor.

This year, New York's Democratic governor, Andrew Cuomo, has proposed a 2014-2015 budget, which cuts aid to libraries by 4.7 percent to $81.6 million, a figure below where funding was 16 years ago. The new budget will take effect in April.

Cuomo's proposal is nearly 20 percent below the $102.4 million stipulated by the chiefly symbolic NYS Education Law. Library funding represents less than one tenth of 1 percent of the state budget, but provides services for 14 million New Yorkers.

Library usage and demand have increased dramatically since the start of the Great Recession in 2008. Public libraries, which provide free access to learning resources, technologies and educational programming, are more critical than ever given the drastic cuts to public education spending and loss of income experienced by millions of families.

Libraries are the primary source of Internet access for households earning less than $30,000 annually, and for 67 percent of households earning less than $20,000, because they do not have a computer and/or Internet service at home. A 2010 national study found that 4.4 million "economically impacted Americans" use the library for essential job-related activities.

"Despite this demonstrated ability of libraries to adjust to meet the growing needs of the public, many libraries across the country face severe budget cuts," said Susan Hildreth, director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, commenting on a study of library use in the decade ending in 2009. "It's important to remember that this data ends with 2009, before even more severe budget crises put so many libraries and library programs at risk." In 2012, more than 40 percent of states reported decreased funding for public libraries.

The cuts occur at a time when Cuomo is proposing significant new tax reductions for the wealthiest New Yorkers, including massive tax incentives for corporations, while he simultaneously boasts that the state is operating at a surplus expected to reach $2 billion by 2016-2017. With the decreased tax revenue from income and corporate taxes, this surplus will be attained through deep cuts in social programs and state services.

According to the NYS Education Department, state residents realize $7 in services for every $1 in state library aid spent. This aid helps to ensure that libraries in economically disadvantaged areas retain staff, maintain their hours of service and provide desperately needed information and technical resources.

The NYS Library Association (NYLA), the major professional library organization, states that to keep pace with inflation and to "match the intentions of the framers of the Library Aid structure," aid should "be funded at more than $126 million."

Contrary to the illusions in the state legislators promoted by the Library Association over the past two decades, the state government has consistently starved the libraries of necessary funding. Since 2008, in particular, libraries have been targeted for regular decreases.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2009-2010, under Democratic governor David Paterson, libraries were hit with a 13 percent cut from the previous year's level. In

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2010-2011, library funds were diverted to pay for the federal Medicaid Assistance Program, based on the lie that there was no money to fund both. This amounted to an additional 3.3 percent cut from 2009-2010, or a $2.85 million loss.

In FY 2011-2012, libraries were cut 6.42 percent, reducing funding to $79 million. In 2012-2013, for the first time 2010 census data was used, requiring funding levels of $102.4 million, according to NYS Education Law. Instead, funding was increased by only 3.28 percent to $81.6 million. In FY 2013-2014, Library Aid increased by 4.88 percent to $85.6 million, after the legislature agreed to a last-minute addition of $4 million in one-time funding. Cuomo's latest budget proposal reduces levels back to those of FY 2012-2013.

The state Library Association and other professional organizations advise their members to politely "urge" their political representatives to restore funding. As the executive director of the NYLA, Jeremy Johannesen, complacently stated in an interview in the *School Library Journal*, "many had hoped Cuomo would use [last year's budget of]…$85.67 million as a new baseline and build from there." He lamented that "It's hard not to have the Legislature meet funding" levels stipulated by the law.

The unions representing library workers have resorted to their usual urgings that members entreat lawmakers to restore aid. In the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, Civil Service Employees Association/City of Rochester Library Workers Local 828 president Ove Overmeyer commented, "Library advocates everywhere should be asking the governor's office and their state lawmakers to rethink this cut and rectify library aid."

These fruitless appeals are aimed at preventing any independent political mobilization of the working class against both big business parties and the corporate and financial elite, which they represent.

Libraries are being targeted as part of the general assault on the right to public education and culture and the attacks on the living standards and social rights of the working class as a whole. This is taking place under conditions in which Wall Street stock markets are hitting record levels and hedge fund managers are reeling in billions.

The establishment of tax-supported public libraries in thousands of communities across the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a vital democratic achievement. Public libraries were given the nickname "The People's University."

In many communities, philanthropic gifts from elites for the establishment of libraries were rejected. Instead, libraries were publicly founded and supported as part of a commitment to fund them in perpetuity. Public libraries continue to receive widespread public support today, evidenced by the fact that even since 2008, New York voters have continued to approve library budgets 97 percent of the time.

The American ruling class, however, has long repudiated any commitment to democracy and the enlightenment of the population. Driven by its insatiable appetite for enrichment, the modern day financial aristocracy is determined to turn the clock back to the days when only the wealthy had access to mankind's collective knowledge.

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