Boston School Committee approves austerity budget

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On the night of March 26, the Boston School Committee unanimously approved a fiscal year 2015 budget that will result in hundreds of job cuts: more than 200 teachers and paralegals, along with at least 110 administrative staff. (See: "New attacks on Boston Public School workers, students")

In a separate vote, the committee unanimously approved a policy that will force 7th and 8th graders to ride public transportation to school instead of yellow buses. Interim Superintendent John McDonough forced through that policy—which he says will save the school department $11 million next year—by threatening to cut a range of other programs if the Committee voted against it.

The Boston School Committee is appointed by the mayor—to terms that rotate on a staggered basis—and not democratically elected. Including the public comment period of Wednesday's meeting, it held only four meetings about next year's budget and limited public comments to two minutes per person.

The undemocratic character of the process was summed up angrily by one of the last parents to speak at last Wednesday's hearing: "Parents work hard to provide for our children and we get reduced to two minutes to beg for essential services."

During the public comments, City Councilor Tito Jackson presented a resolution that the Boston City Council had passed unanimously earlier in the day, urging the School Committee to delay voting on the school bus cuts until they could be studied further. The committee responded by including in their motion the convening of a toothless "working group" to keep it informed of problems that arise. An audience member called out that children would be turned into guinea pigs for an untested transportation scheme.

That the school bus cuts are motivated only by the drive for austerity was made clear when a presentation by the schools' transportation administrators stated that "school bus transportation is among the safest modes of transportation that exist." If not for the drive to cut public spending, no change would be needed.

Despite the lack of opportunities for public comment on the bus cuts, the school administration is already making preparations for imposing them. At a previous meeting held March 18 in the city's Brighton neighborhood, it was revealed that the Boston Public Schools (BPS) police have already met with the Transit Police and Boston Police about how to crack down on what they will inevitably paint as youth delinquency on city trains and buses.

Neither the School Committee, the superintendent, nor the bus drivers union has breathed a word about how many yellow bus driver jobs will be cut when the service is no longer provided for 7th and 8th graders, who number slightly more than 4,500. However, $11 million plus the cost of MBTA passes will have to be cut from the drivers' contract if McDonough's savings are to be realized. The total transportation budget is about $88 million.

Jackson raised this issue during public comments on Wednesday night, and school administrators responded only that Veolia Transportation's management fee will not be cut. The company will continue to profit, no matter how many bus drivers lose their jobs. A picket outside the hall by United Steel Workers local 8751, to which many school bus drivers belong, advocated not for them but rather for the defense of the union's status.

The overall budget, including transportation cuts and the hundreds of job cuts, still needs to go to the City Council for approval. It is unlikely, however, that any substantive changes will be made at that level.

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Boston has a long history of providing public education, and the BPS web site boasts that it's the "nation's first school district." The Massachusetts Constitution, quoted by a parent who spoke against the budget cuts, provides that "it shall be the duty of legislatures and magistrates, in all future periods of this commonwealth, to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them; especially … public schools and grammar schools in the towns."

Now School Committee members consider it their duty to protect profits and the exploitation of "human capital" while imposing austerity on students. As the WSWS has reported, there are more than 1,400 millionaires living in the city of Boston, whose combined wealth would cover much more than the $107 million being cut from the school budget.

As the committee was preparing to vote on the school bus cuts, the question was raised of whether they can be reversed if it is found that public transportation doesn't work for 7th and 8th graders. In what amounted to blackmail, McDonough responded that any such restoration of transportation funding would mean cuts to K1 programs, a Laptops for Learning program, extended learning time in schools, and other programs.

The approved budget includes $1 million for technology infrastructure associated with Common Core implementation and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) testing. Because many teachers and parents spoke against standardized testing, McDonough was reduced to arguing that this money is for equipment, not the testing itself. However, the angry mood among workers and parents in the overcrowded room was eloquently expressed on this topic.

One speaker remarked that "we need to spend more time on learning and literacy and less time on testing to benefit the business elite."

A 12th grade teacher asked, "Who said we wanted to be the lab rats for a test that doesn't really matter?" A 2nd grade teacher complained that her school doesn't have enough money for books—despite her students' love of them—at a time when the BPS is spending $1 million to implement standardized testing.

An Occupational Therapist who works individually with students stated that each month she loses between 25 and 50 percent of treatment time to standardized testing.

A 7th grade teacher complained about having lost three weeks of instructional time to standardized testing so far this year, while a student spoke about having to spend four hours per day for three days on the MCAS standardized tests.

These tests and the Common Core standards are being imposed to train future workers for the needs of capitalism, in addition to whatever profits will be reaped by the testing companies. Nonetheless, a number of speakers associated with Workers World, the United Steel Workers local, and associated groupings—given names such as the Boston Truth Coalition and the Coalition for Equal Education—used the public comment period to imply that the School Committee is motivated by racial prejudice and not class interests.

The common thread in their arguments was that cutting school bus funding will lead to a return to the segregated schools that existed in Boston before the 1974 implementation of citywide busing. One of the speakers advancing this argument, named Emily Royce, identified herself as "unaffiliated," but is in fact affiliated with Pride at Work, a "national AFL-CIO official constituency organization."

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