New wave of tuition hikes proposed for California universities

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Over the past several weeks, the University of California Board of Regents has proposed tuition hikes in light of projected budget shortfalls. Despite California Governor Jerry Brown's 5 percent increase in funding, the budget proposed by the UC Regents in November was short $124 million.

Rejecting Brown's 2014-15 budget proposal, which included no funding for UC's Retirement Plan, the state Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) has recommended a further shifting of the burden of budgetary woes onto students through $78 million in tuition increases. It also proceeds from the false premise that there is some fundamental antagonism between maintaining UC workers' pensions and affordable tuition.

Meanwhile, the California State University (CSU) Board of Trustees has already moved to implement so-called "student success fees," essentially tuition increases in all but name. The LAO has also recommended $84 million in tuition increases for the CSU campuses. As of this writing, 11 of 23 CSU campuses have already adopted these fees, which range from $200 to $630 per semester. Across the CSU campuses in question, the fees are ostensibly meant to facilitate technology upgrades, expanded library hours, increased course availability and improvements to athletics facilities.

In 2012, Democratic Governor Brown campaigned vigorously for the Proposition 30 ballot measure, titled "Temporary Taxes to Fund Education." Under the pretext of "saving education," Brown sought the assurances of the CSU and UC managements that tuition would not be raised if the measure were to pass.

The measure would provide some temporary funding for education. But rather than invest the necessary long term public resources in such an essential service, it effectively placed a band-aid on the budget problem, which in any case was largely paid for by working people in the form of a regressive sales tax aid. Brown also effectively held California's education system hostage by means of a catastrophic $6 billion in "trigger cuts" threatened in case Prop 30 did not pass.

There was never any serious attempt on the Brown administration's part to actually enforce a tuition freeze. The fact that tuition increases are now in various stages of implementation constitutes a damning exposure of the political fraud behind the passage of Proposition 30. California's ruling elite and its political representatives have reneged upon whatever promises were made during campaign season. As the WSWS reported in 2012, "When next year's deficit arrives, public education would once again be on the chopping block."

Brown, the Democrats and their pseudo-left and trade union coterie cynically sought to paint Proposition 30 in populist colors on the basis that it included a meager tax increase on incomes over $250,000. This was a sop to the growing popular anger over billions of dollars in draconian austerity measures to social programs, layoffs, the spiraling cost of higher education and student debt, and the growth of social inequality.

The trade unions played a leading role in the reactionary swindle of the "Yes on 30" campaign by supplying the bulk of campaign contributions. In total, about $67.1 million was raised, including $11.5 million by the California Teachers Association, the California State Council of Service Employees ($10.7 million), as well as the American Federation of Teachers ($4.7 million) and California Federation of Teachers ($4.2 million).

Prop 30's 1 to 3 percent tax on annual incomes over $250,000 does nothing to fundamentally alter the reality that California ranks seventh highest in income inequality across the 50 states. Even after Prop 30, the top 1 percent of California households only pay approximately 8.8 percent of their income to state and local taxes, while the poorest fifth of California's families pay approximately 10.6 percent. Of the additional $6.6 billion from the tax

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measure flowing into the state's coffers, only $3.1 billion—that is, less than half—would actually end up funding education. The actual course of events since 2012 laid bare the refusal by the Brown administration to address California's essentially regressive tax structure or the spiraling cost of education.

For 15 years, university students in California have faced an unremitting growth in the cost of education. Adjusting for inflation, in 2001 the average cost of tuitions and fees for a UC undergraduate totaled just over $5,000. In 2013, that financial burden ballooned to $12,000. The trend is similar for students throughout the CSU system. In 2001, a full-time undergraduate student paid a tuition fee of $1,428; by 2011, the figure had grown to $5,472.

The rise of the cost of higher education prices out many working class families that would otherwise send their children to school. For those who take on the massive debts, averaging $29,000 in student loans, the situation is perversely compounded as they graduate into a bleak job market where full-time employment is increasingly scarce.

The attack on higher education—and on public education more generally—is of a piece with a broader dismantling of health care and social welfare programs that has assumed a frenzied tempo in California since the onset of the 2008 economic crisis. Among the combined cuts by the Arnold Schwarzenegger and Brown administrations are a $1.4 billion reduction in funding to CalWorks (a welfare program that gives cash aid and services to eligible California families), $750 million from Department of Developmental Services for state-subsidized child health care, as well as $1.7 billion from Medi-Cal.

The constant refrain that "there is not enough money" rings doubly hollow in light of the fact that the wealthiest Californian, Lawrence Ellison, CEO of the software firm Oracle Corporation, would have enough wealth to cover the entire budget deficit, let alone that of the state university system, and still have well over $10 billion in net worth.

In January 2013, Brown announced that California finally had a budget surplus for the first time in over 10 years, and cited this fact as proof of the need for repeated austerity measures for the state to continue "living within its means." For Brown and the capitalist ruling class on whose behalf he speaks, such appeals can only mean rolling back the clock on the historic gains of the working class of a century and more.

Funding for education is now at its lowest since the 1970s. Since 2008, about $18 billion has been taken away from K-12 education as a direct result of Brown's drive for austerity.

Education is increasingly seen less as a social right and more as a privilege reserved for wealthier social layers. The return of the aristocratic principle in education and culture is entirely in keeping with the general shift towards authoritarian and antidemocratic forms of rule needed to maintain such unprecedented levels of social inequality overseen by Democrats and Republicans alike.

Students have already organized protests against the new fees in the CSU system at the San Diego State, Dominguez Hills, Long Beach, and Fullerton campuses. Thus far, the scope of the demonstrations remains within the bounds of attempting to exert pressure on their respective campus boards of trustees.

However, the rising cost of tuition cannot be fought by appealing to the good graces of this or that university administrator, or either of the two parties of big business. Such was the underlying perspective that typified the larger student protest movement in late 2009 and March 2010 against massive budget cuts, furloughs and hikes.

The difficulties facing students and working families in California do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, they constitute one facet of the broader crisis of capitalism since 2008, which has thus far meant only ruthless austerity for workers and students across the world. To the extent that student anger is limited to campus protests, it will be easily isolated and diffused along safe political channels. Such a political impasse is not unique—it presents itself to student struggles around the world, including those in Chile, Mexico, Quebec and Britain.

A viable struggle for the defense of public education as a social right can be carried out solely on the basis of a principled international socialist program. Students must broaden and deepen their struggle by turning to the working class and linking their struggles together. To this end, a new political leadership must be built. Students and workers are encouraged to contact the Socialist Equality Party and establish chapters of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.

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