

Wisconsin governor proposes largest ever cuts to public university system

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While previewing his proposed budget last week Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker proposed the largest cuts to university spending in the school system's 120-year history. The cuts are part of a proposed state budget announced this week tailored to cover a projected two year shortfall of between \$900 million and \$2 billion.

Walker himself is currently in the midst of preparations for a possible presidential campaign in 2016.

In a press release published by Walker's office on January 27, the governor said: "The people of Wisconsin deserve a government that is more effective, more efficient, and more accountable, and this plan protects the taxpayers and allows for a stronger UW [University of Wisconsin] System in the future."

Walker's proposal for "stronger" public universities entails gutting them of funding. The \$300 million Walker plans to slash from UW over two years will lead to reduced pay for faculty and staff, program reductions, cuts to sick leave and tenure, layoffs, higher tuition and fees, and an increased reliance on corporate quid pro quo agreements to fund research.

The university system had requested an increase in funding of \$95 million to cover added costs for the coming two years.

In response to Walker's cuts, UW-Milwaukee Chancellor Mark Mone stated, "Everything has to be looked at with a cut of this magnitude." Bernie Patterson, chancellor at UW-Stevens Point said that he would almost definitely lay off staff because of the cuts.

Though Walker's plan cynically includes a tuition freeze through 2017, the reduction in state funding will necessarily mean that future revenue will be generated on the backs of students and their families. The

governor's office effectively guaranteed such an outcome, noting that after the tuition freeze, the UW system "will have flexibility to adjust tuition based on demand, making them more competitive and market based."

Tuition at UW-Madison—the UW system's flagship university—increased 141 percent between 2002 and 2012, according to the Legislative Fiscal Bureau research group. Under Walker's plan, Madison is slated to lose \$60 million in funding in each of the next two years. According to *Inside Higher Ed*, Madison "had also been using \$23 million a year in reserve funds that are drying up and that the state will not repay, so the total hit will effectively be \$166 million over the next two years."

Speaking on a right-wing radio talk show last week, Walker attacked professors and administrators at the University of Wisconsin, insisting that they deserved cuts to pay, tenure, sick leave, and other benefits. "Maybe it's time for faculty and staff to start thinking about teaching more classes and doing more work," Walker said.

While Walker applies his cheap talk of "efficiency" and "accountability" to justify cutting funding for education, the same logic does not apply to his counterparts in the corporate world. Walker's budget proposal includes \$500 million to be made available to build a new stadium for the National Basketball Association team in Milwaukee. Walker's plan would require the state to take out \$200 million in bonds, while also relying on the city and surrounding suburbs for financial support.

In other words, Walker is using the state budget to launder hundreds of millions of dollars from the public school system into the pockets of the corporate owners of a professional basketball team. Although the

political establishment calls this “efficiency,” a more accurate term for this process would be theft.

Wisconsin Democrats responded to Walker’s proposal with their typical hollow statements of opposition, with the party’s official Facebook page noting the plan is a “nightmare.”

In reality, the Democratic Party is also responsible for overseeing drastic cuts to the UW system. Walker’s predecessor, Democrat Jim Doyle, slashed \$250 million from the UW system from 2003 to 2005 alone. Doyle’s cuts to UW were the first in the state since at least the 1980s. Doyle also oversaw \$284 million in cuts from public schools during the 2009-2011 budget and proposed firing 1,100 state employees and rescinding pay raises for 10,000 state employees. Doyle’s 2009 proposals were supported by a Democratic Party-controlled state legislature.

Doyle himself called attention to this record in 2011, when he sought to portray his Democratic administration as more right-wing than Walker’s.

“I’ve made deeper cuts than any governor has ever made and I’ve had to impose tougher cost controls on state employees than anybody’s made,” he told a Milwaukee television station.

Doyle’s cuts were aimed not only at public education, but also at the working class of Wisconsin more broadly.

Under Doyle, public employee wages increased at the slowest pace since 1971, the portion of employee paid health insurance premiums doubled, a 3 percent pay cut was enforced through furloughs from 2009-2011, and employee pension payments increased.

The Democratic Party itself is responsible for setting a precedent of cuts, which Walker has intensified.

Workers and youth in Wisconsin must be warned: the Democratic Party is no more interested in waging a struggle to defend public education or state workers than the Walker administration. The Democratic Party showed its true colors in 2011 when it sought to channel widespread opposition to Walker’s reactionary Act 10 legislation into the dead-end “recall” campaign, and by running millionaire businesswoman Mary Burke against Walker in 2014.

Workers and students can place no faith in the Democratic Party, from the Obama administration down to the Wisconsin Democratic Party, they represent the same social layer that Walker does: a

financial aristocracy whose parasitic interests are directly opposed to the needs of the broad masses of the world’s population.



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