

City University of New York faculty protest for higher wages and defense of education

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On November 4, hundreds of City University of New York (CUNY) faculty and professional staff participated in a demonstration in Midtown Manhattan for a new contract and salary increases.

Roughly 25,000 members of the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) at CUNY have worked the past five years without a contract, and have not received a wage increase for six years. Prior to the demonstration, CUNY officials proposed a 6 percent wage increase covering the period from October 20, 2010 to October 19, 2016.

The administration's proposed wage increase is an insult to the faculty and staff workers, since inflation over the last five years has increased by more than 8 percent. According to the *Economist*, the cost of living in New York City has also skyrocketed, increasing by roughly 23 percent between 2009 and 2014.

Currently, associate professors earn approximately \$90,000 a year while adjuncts, who make up the majority of CUNY's professional staff, earn only \$3,000 per course.

The PSC and CUNY administration are still undergoing negotiations on the final contract.

The de facto wage freeze for faculty over the past six years is part of the larger attack on public education, including the \$1.5 billion worth of cuts from the State University of New York (SUNY) and CUNY—the first and third largest public university systems in the US, respectively—since 2008.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo as part of his 2011 budget intensified this assault on CUNY. In the budget, he agreed to cut \$91.5 million from CUNY's senior colleges, and \$12.3 million from CUNY's community colleges.

The budget also included a \$300 per year tuition increase for five years—roughly a 30 percent

increase—for both CUNY and SUNY schools as part of the governor's "Rational Tuition Plan." Following the announcement of the plan, many CUNY and SUNY students risked arrest by protesting against tuition hikes, which made college unaffordable for many low-income students.

Despite Cuomo's initial claims that the tuition increase would go towards improving education, CUNY and SUNY administrations have been forced to use revenues from tuition to maintain current programs and mandatory costs—such as rent.

As a result of the state's refusal to cover these expenses, CUNY has become increasingly dependent on revenue from tuition to cover its \$3.2 billion budget. State aid has dropped from 74 percent of the budget at CUNY's senior colleges in 1990-91 to 53 percent in 2014-15. Currently, 45 percent of CUNY's total budget comes from tuition, another 45 percent comes from state aid, and the remaining ten percent comes from the city.

Cuomo plans to further extend the underfunding of public universities. The 2015-2016 state budget fails to cover any part of the \$62.9 million in mandatory costs at CUNY's senior colleges.

The 2015-2016 budget also cuts aid to the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), which provides a grant of up to \$5,165 per year for low-income full-time students—defined as an individual making less than \$40,000 a year—by 14.6 percent for the 2016 fiscal year compared to the previous year.

In the past, the state has underfunded CUNY leaving the university system strained to pay the "TAP gap," the difference between the TAP grants and tuition that CUNY legally has to pay for. It is estimated that TAP will cost CUNY \$49 million for this academic year.

By cutting TAP the state further shifts the costs of

low-income students onto the CUNY budget. Approximately two-thirds of CUNY's undergraduate students are awarded both the TAP and federal Pell grants allowing them to attend college tuition-free.

The result of years of budget cuts has led to many CUNY schools facing funding problems and budget shortfalls worsening the situation for students and faculty.

CUNY's City College of New York (CCNY), for example, is experiencing a \$14.6 million budget gap as a result of the state's decision to decrease funding by \$4.2 million and the CUNY administration cutting \$1.7 million for the 2016 fiscal year, despite CCNY's costs expected to increase by \$5.4 million. CCNY also fell \$3.3 million short of its 2015 tuition target of \$88 million due to shrinking enrollment.

CCNY has responded by offsetting the costs on both students and faculty. Vice Chancellor for Budget and Finance Matthew Sapienza has already requested that the state renew part of the 2011 budget allowing the school to raise tuition after a five-year deadline expires. The school has also announced that, as part of its "Deficit Closing Strategies," it will freeze hiring new faculty, sabbatical funding will be returned to the divisions, implement a five percent reduction from all administrative divisions, and impose a 3.6 percent reduction from all academic divisions.

The situation at CCNY is emblematic of the conditions facing the entire CUNY system for decades. In 1975, the last year CUNY was tuition-free, the school employed 11,500 full-time faculty. In the 2014 fall semester, CUNY schools tuition was \$3,015 per semester and employed only 7,698 full-time faculty, and has become dependent on the 12,000 adjuncts to teach the 270,000 degree-credit students.

Both the full-time faculty and adjuncts have expressed massive hostility to the ongoing attacks on education and their living standards by voting to authorize a strike last October.

Under these conditions, the PSC called the demonstration in Midtown Manhattan that drew 800, including a civil disobedience stunt in which 54 PSC members were arrested after locking arms and sitting down in front of the doorway to 205 East 42nd Street building that houses CUNY administration offices.

In a letter posted on the PSC web site, PSC/CUNY President Barbara Bowen claimed that the

demonstration made CUNY propose a 4 percent wage increase in 2016, far below the rise in the cost of living in New York City over the past few years. She went on to state, "The union's escalating campaign has shown that we can force CUNY to move on economics. We must keep the pressure on [CUNY] Chancellor [James] Milliken and take our demand to Governor Cuomo."

Bowen's claim that CUNY faculty and adjuncts should appeal to the governor, who has overseen the attack on public education and their living conditions, is absurd and politically malignant.

The faculty and professional staff at CUNY have expressed a desire to fight against austerity and the continued attacks on their living standards, but like the autoworkers and New York City school bus drivers, they are held back by their union, which has put forward the bankrupt perspective of pressuring the Democrats for reforms. Faculty and adjuncts must draw the lessons of recent workers' struggles, and break with the Democrats—which have proven to be no less ruthless in attacking living standards than the Republicans—and their union hangers-on.



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