

“Education should be a right”

Chicago students and faculty oppose potential school closure, layoffs

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The state of Illinois has been without a budget since July 2015, as part of an impasse between Democrats and Republicans over how best to implement an austerity budget. Along with critical social programs, higher education has become a target for drastic cuts by both parties, ultimately serving the interests of the financial elite. Multiple universities and community colleges have not received state appropriations for more than eight months.

Chicago State University (CSU), located in Chicago’s South Side, is one of many institutions that now confront devastating financial circumstances. The university—which serves 4,500 students of largely working-class backgrounds—has declared a state of “financial exigency” and could run out of funds to keep the institution open as early as the end of March.

Last Friday, CSU administration issued a notice of potential layoffs for all 900 faculty, staff and administration due to a lack of state funding, which amounts to over 30 percent of its operating budget. Other universities like CSU have also issued layoffs, cut budgets, and have relied on financial reserves that are rapidly being depleted.

As part of the budgetary impasse and the bipartisan assault on education, Monetary Award Program (MAP) grants for low-income students have also been frozen. Universities with more substantial endowments are able to weather the lack of funding temporarily, but those schools without such fallbacks will have to cut financial assistance for low-income students.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to students and faculty about the attacks on public education.

Angel, a student at CSU, spoke about the education

budget being held hostage to the political infighting between the Republicans led by Governor Bruce Rauner and the Democrats led by Illinois Speaker of the House Mike Madigan.

“I think it’s extremely upsetting that we have these cuts happening,” she began. “CSU is on the verge of becoming extinct. We see the political games that Rauner, Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Mike Madigan want to play with education.

“There’s an overwhelming need for education for us. But the big corporations want to keep the wealth where it is, for the 1 percent. These people don’t need MAP grants. They don’t need financial aid. They have their tuition paid for four times over before they are even born. I’m a student for whom \$1,200 is the difference between me and a degree, or me being on unemployment or working a minimum wage job.

“During the recession, there was so much forgiveness for the banks and the corporations tanking the economy, but there’s no forgiveness for education. Yes, our enrollment has dropped over the past years, but it’s not the students’ fault. I had to move out of the dorm because I couldn’t afford it without MAP grants. Why is the mismanagement of billions of dollars overlooked and swept under the rug, but they can cut education? It just goes to show that money rules the world. It’s really sad. Money controls our political system.”

A tenured professor at CSU with 15 years’ experience said, “I can’t believe it. We worry about our students and that is our main concern. Students need to finish their education. These are underserved students in the South Side of Chicago.

“Things have gotten quite bad that some of our

students live in cars. There are students that want education so badly that they will sacrifice everything for it. Our kids deserve better than this. If you cut education, what are the alternatives? You will destroy the economy and we will lose many intelligent people. This is chaos.”

One student spoke about the chaotic impact of the impending layoffs on students’ academic lives, noting that it was going to affect many of her peers because they were going to have to change majors. She also expressed concern that she would not fulfill her dream of becoming a teacher.

When asked about the motive behind the cuts to higher education, she said that she didn’t understand why it was happening. She was concerned that the cuts would have a domino effect on education as a whole, from colleges all the way down to the elementary level. She also expressed concern that “[the U.S. is] heading in a different direction” as a country. “People from other countries can see what is going on and wonder, ‘Why is this happening?’” in regards to a wealthy country like the U.S.

Kristen spoke about how the budget cuts impacted faculty and other employees. “It’s very unfortunate that it’s coming down to budgets having to be cut, with people losing their jobs. The students are affected too. We’re the ones that are suffering. The rich people have money to survive on. It’s not fair that we don’t have the same equal opportunity to get an education, to keep our jobs, or anything for that matter.”

Eman, a student from the University of Illinois Chicago spoke about the impact of the cuts. “My father works at CSU,” she said. “I find it absolutely insane that the governor is trying to cut funding off from higher education to fix the state budget when this is going to be affecting families.

“Students that receive MAP grants are affected by this, and my father has three (including myself) that are in college and him losing his job after all these years because the state has yet to have a budget is ridiculous.”

Another CSU student, Jasmine, noted, “We have students who don’t even know if they’re going to graduate or what’s going to happen if the school closes down. We have all these student loans, and people are probably not even going to get to finish. Everybody’s got to think about what they’re going to do about their

education, and it’s all of a sudden! It’s unfair! First they started with the elementary schools, with Chicago Public Schools, and now they’re going to take away all the colleges. What are we going to do?”

Micaiah, a transfer student to CSU, noted, “There’s no reason why a school that’s been around 150 years should close because there’s no funding. Most of us don’t get fed on a silver spoon. The government is preventing us from getting an education with these cuts. It’s unfair. Education should be a right, not the privilege of the rich.

“Everything that’s happening to CSU comes down to capitalism. They want to say capitalism makes you better and everything else. At the end of the day, capitalism has hurt so many working class people. Businesses are making money off us regardless, so they don’t care if we get an education or not. They still get their money, we lose our homes, and have homeless people. It’s all because of capitalism. Regular working American people have lost their jobs, there’s no money for education, or to put food on the table. They say it’s the ‘land of the free’, but are we really free?”

Students were also shocked to learn about the money spent on war while money for education was being squandered. Reporters also noted that the increase in military spending is in preparation for war with China and Russia, and almost definitely in escalation of the wars in Syria and Iraq. Horrified, one student responded that the possibility of a war with Russia “could be a catastrophe.”



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