

Corruption probe at City College of New York points to decline of public higher education

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A federal investigation into the former president of the City College of New York has expanded, according to a report last week in the *New York Times*.

Lisa Coico, the first graduate of the college to become its president, was forced to resign last October after reports suggesting possible misappropriation of funds, as well as an effort to cover up the irregularities with a memo that appeared to be fabricated.

Coico became president in 2010 and within a short time, there were allegations of improper activities in connection with the college's non-profit fundraising arm, the 21st Century Foundation. The general counsel of the City University of New York (CUNY) ordered Coico to reimburse some \$51,000 in expenses in such areas as housekeeping, food and furniture.

Last year's probe of the relationship between the Foundation and Coico's finances has now expanded to include the City College Fund, a smaller non-profit fundraising organization that was founded in 1946. It provides scholarships and financial aid to students and also organizes alumni reunions.

CUNY, the largest urban university system in the US, consists of two dozen institutions and enrolls some 270,000 degree-seeking students and a similar number in continuing education programs. City College, with about 15,000 students, is the flagship and historic symbol of the entire system. The CUNY system reflects the diverse character of the working class in the city, with roughly equal percentages of black, white, Hispanic and Asian students.

CUNY, which traces its origins back to 1847, was tuition-free until 1976. Forty years ago, City College students would have been dumbfounded at charges of financial corruption like the ones that are being investigated today. At the time, a salary of \$460,000 for

the college president, what Coico was being paid when she abruptly resigned, would have been equally unbelievable.

City College, which has graduated ten future Nobel Prize winners, was for generations referred to as the "Harvard of the proletariat." It was founded on the pledge of providing a quality higher education for the children of the working class, the immigrants and the poor.

Over the past four decades, however, annual tuition has risen to \$6,300, not including several hundred dollars in other fees. This is modest only when compared to four-year private universities, where tuition plus room and board now can reach 8 or 10 times this figure.

For many CUNY students, tuition nonetheless creates serious obstacles. About 60 percent of the students come from families with annual incomes of \$30,000 or less, near or below the poverty line. Tens of thousands of young people are prevented from entering CUNY, and others forced to drop out, because of tuition costs.

While tuition has been rising by about \$300 annually, the system has been hit by relentless state budget cuts, especially since the 2008 financial crash, implemented over the past decade by Democratic Party governors.

Classes have increasingly been taught by poorly-paid adjunct faculty, whose numbers have increased by 23 percent in recent years while the number full-time faculty has remained flat. Unionized faculty and staff worked for more than six years without a contract, until a deal was imposed last fall that, while granting certain givebacks, left the employees pay increases barely even with inflation. The staff union, the Professional Staff Congress, claims to oppose the budget cuts but accepts them in practice, tying its membership to the Democrats.

The budget cuts reflect a national crisis, an integral part of the massive transfer of resources to the banks and super-

rich at the expense of the wages and conditions of the working class, along with the public services on which they depend. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported last year that states have cut public higher education spending by 17 percent while tuition has increased by 33 percent since the financial crash. Tuition, which used to contribute 20 percent of the costs of the City University, now contributes 45 percent.

The declining conditions at CUNY, as well as at the even larger State University of New York system, must be seen in this context. Students have found themselves in crowded classes, with elective courses canceled, basic instructional materials absent and infrastructure crumbling. A news article in the *New York Times* last year reported on computers using floppy disks and other outdated technology, leaking ceilings, and public areas infested with bedbugs, roaches and other rodents.

While students struggle to get an education, President Coico was raking in a salary that placed her in or very near the top one percent of society. She also received a housing allowance of \$90,000, more than three times the annual total income of most CUNY students' families.

Outrage over this is understandable, but it is also necessary to go further, to its fundamental source. The CUNY crisis, including the signs of corruption, is about far more than one individual. It is the product of vast changes that have taken place in the system of public higher education and of higher education as a whole in recent decades.

Systems such as CUNY have not yet been privatized, but the virus of the profit system has thoroughly infiltrated them, just as it has in the supposedly non-profit fields of medicine, the arts and elsewhere. The profit interests of Wall Street dictate the ruthless budget cuts, and far more are on the way under the Trump administration.

As public funding dries up, schools have inevitably entered the competition for philanthropic dollars to make up for the cutbacks. The 21st Century Foundation, for instance, trumpeted the donation of \$26 million by Andrew Grove, former CEO of Intel Corporation, back in 2005. The big donations never make up for the cuts, however, and they tie these purportedly public institutions ever more tightly to the ruling elite and its interests. Philanthropic fundraising is also accompanied by the competition for faculty and for administrators who can in turn work to bring in more money.

Presiding over the decay of public higher education are the political representatives of Wall Street. These include

the Democratic mayor of New York City, Bill de Blasio, who has remained largely silent on this crisis, even when the state government under Governor Andrew Cuomo threatened last year to cut \$485 million from the city's university system.

De Blasio hypocritically campaigned in 2013 on the slogan of "A tale of two cities." After more than three years of de Blasio's administration, the phrase applies to New York more than ever before. While luxury residential towers proliferate endlessly, homelessness reaches new record levels, the transit system decays and the schools and other public services continue to lose ground.

Cuomo eventually relented on his threat to cut CUNY funds last year, and the state remains the biggest source for the \$3.2 billion annual funding to the system. Even so, earlier budget cuts have not been restored, and the system remains more and more dependent on continuous tuition increases and outside funding.

Cuomo, responding to the growing anger which found a reflection in last year's campaign of Bernie Sanders, and positioning himself for a possible "left" presidential campaign of his own in 2020, two months ago suddenly declared his support for free tuition for all students in the SUNY and CUNY systems.

Even if some such scheme makes its way through the New York State Legislature, it is bound to be accompanied by restrictions so severe that it barely makes a dent in the conditions facing students in the state and city university systems. Cuomo's pledge, moreover, says nothing about the funding crisis for the state and city colleges. Free tuition for a substandard education is no advance at all.

The answer to the crisis cannot come from proven big business spokesmen like Cuomo and the rest of the Democratic Party. The defense of public higher education requires a new political strategy, breaking from both parties of big business and their union accomplices. Free and quality higher education can only be won as part of the fight for a socialism.



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