Tuition hikes implemented throughout the United States, placing ever growing financial burden on students

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While the academic year has drawn to a close for most colleges and universities, students returning to school in the fall can expect to pay even more on top of already unaffordable tuition rates, as significant increases have been announced at campuses in several states across the United States for the 2017-2018 school year.

The Board of Regents in Montana voted last Friday to raise tuition at the majority of public campuses. Tuition hikes range from 2.3 percent at Montana State University to 28 percent at University of Montana-Western as part of an effort to “equalize costs across the state.” In real value, these increases represent additional costs of up to $1,220 annually for resident students.

California State University’s governing board also voted last week on a 4.9 percent increase for resident tuition at all its campuses state-wide. Undergraduates at CSU will be paying an additional $270, and graduates an additional $438. This decision comes five months after the University of California system approved a 2.5 percent increase for tuition and fees.

Nearly all public colleges in New Mexico have raised tuition by an average of 7.5 percent, representing additional costs between $95 and $250. These hikes were announced in tandem with a legislature vote to reduce coverage provided by the Lottery Scholarship—a financial aid program for state residents covering 26,000 students—from 90 percent of tuition costs to 60 percent.

In Oregon, tuition is set to increase by 8.4 percent at Portland State University and 10.6 percent at the University of Oregon, amounting to extra costs of up to $1,000. Similar increases have been approved in Wisconsin, Iowa, Arizona, Missouri, and other states over the past six months.

Adjusting for inflation, tuition at public universities has risen by a staggering 538 percent between 1985 and 2013. Just since 2012, tuition costs have increased for public 2-year and 4-year colleges by about 10 percent.

During those same periods, state funding for public higher education has drastically declined. Forty-six states spend less per student than just before the 2008-2009 recession, with a decline by more than 30 percent in nine states.

With less funding from the state and federal levels, the burden for educational costs is placed on the backs of students and their families whose means have been increasingly constrained by stagnant wages and the rising cost of living. These hardships mean that working class students, and many from middle- and upper-middle class families, will leave school with crippling amounts of debt.

Scholarships and grants, earnings and savings, and student loans make up the three main categories of post-secondary funding for higher education. At public universities, scholarships and grants cover 30 to 52 percent of net attendance costs for students from families making under $75,000 a year. Federal and state aid has remained relatively stagnant since the recession and is projected to decline. These funding opportunities are becoming more and more scarce as federal grants, such as the Pell grant, and state sponsored financial aid programs, like those in New Mexico, continue to be cut.

Earnings and savings, from both students and their families, are an unlikely counterweight to rising tuition. Though the vast majority of families value college education for their children, over half are not able to build an adequate college savings by the time their kids reach 18. Nearly three-quarters of all Americans have less than $1,000 in their savings, and one-third has nothing saved. Most full-time college students work at least 20 hours a week, with almost all their earnings going towards basic costs of living and miscellaneous education costs.

The rising cost of school, coupled with pressing economic conditions and dwindling public funding helps explain the explosive growth in student loan borrowing. Over 70 percent of working-class students graduate with student loan debt, with an average of approximately $37,000. In the last decade, tuition costs have grown 35 percent while student loan debt has grown by 400 percent. Student loans have been the primary method of offsetting the hikes in tuition and fees for the past decade, since they are widely accessible and backed by the federal government.

Most students, who stand to lose financial aid and do not have additional personal resources to pull from, will be forced to take out even larger loan amounts. Not only is this situation adding to the $1.4 trillion and growing student debt bubble, it is compounding the burden students face both before and after leaving school.

During college, students struggle to maintain a balance between school, work, and personal life often under tight financial constraints. Recent studies reveal that over 40 percent of college students receive SNAP benefits, and half of community college students have inconsistent housing. One in five students today is over 25 years old, many of whom are supporting families of their own. With these conditions, it is no surprise that campuses have reported sharp increases in the frequency and severity of anxiety, depression, and stress-related mental health issues.

After obtaining a well-earned degree, graduates still face few hopeful prospects. The average student leaves school in their mid-twenties to begin their “independent” life. With debt in the tens of thousands of dollars, loan companies grant borrowers a “grace” period of six months before onerous payments begin, which for many will not end for decades.

Indebted graduates are less likely to start businesses, buy homes or cars, or make other significant purchases. Ten percent of young college graduates 24 or younger are neither employed nor enrolled in graduate school. Average wages for employed graduates are only 0.7 percent higher than they were in 2000, reflecting a shortage in quality jobs. The material and emotional effects this financial stress is having on an entire generation cannot be overstated.

These dire conditions have developed as the top 10 percent of the population have gained tremendously. Even students from these upper layers have more opportunities than their working class peers, as they can afford 90 percent of universities without a lifelong debt burden or immediate financial stress.

Furthermore, the ruling class has profited directly from rising education costs and debt. Student loan servicing companies rake in billions of annual profits, corporate partners cash in on the market, and school administrators lead lavish lifestyles, all while the majority of students shoulder the expense.

Under these unprecedented conditions, it is not surprising that youth and students are beginning to look for a political solution.

All students have a right to a free education, to quality jobs, and affordable housing. However, only under socialism, where the working class holds power, can these rights be guaranteed. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality and Socialist Equality Party call upon students, youth, and workers to take up a fight against the ruling class, with a revolutionary socialist program that defends the interests of the working class and youth internationally.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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