

Students oppose Portland State University tuition hikes

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On Thursday morning, the Board of Trustees at Portland State University (PSU) voted at a public meeting to postpone a decision on tuition hikes by two weeks in the face of student backlash. The meeting was ostensibly called to “consider” the proposal to raise tuition by 14 percent over the next two years, but the real reason was to allow students to let off steam; the decision to raise tuition, the board made clear at the end of the meeting, had already been made.

The state-appointed board includes former business owners, health insurance executives and other business and corporate elites. Collectively, their accumulated wealth is in the tens of millions. PSU President Rahmat Shoureshi alone makes a base salary of \$600,000 plus additional living expenses.

The meeting opened with a presentation composed of a series of graphs which purported to show that there was no money to cover basic costs of the university. In an attempt to pit students and teachers against each other many board members repeatedly noted that the highest cost was the salaries of the teachers. After the presentation the board heard testimony from just a handful of the students in attendance, many of whom spoke movingly about the economic hardship high tuition places on their lives.

Katherine, a 28-year-old business student, explained to the trustees, many of them millionaires, her situation working 20 hours per week at a minimum wage job with a full course load and extracurricular activities. “It is challenging simply keeping my grades where they need to be” she said. “I work a part time job and I go to school full time. I apply for scholarships, but they require that you do extracurricular activities, which I also do. I have every hour of my day booked.”

Katherine told IYSSE members after the meeting that she is sometimes forced to skip homework or class

because of her work schedule. She explained that her situation was not unique on the campus. “There is a food pantry on campus and you can go see there is a line 50 or 60 feet long of students.” A 2016 survey showed that 54 percent of students at PSU are food insecure.

“All of this causes many mental health issues among students,” Katherine explained. “They are depressed. There’s a lot of people struggling.”

After each student speaker a member of the board delivered the canned response, “Thank you for sharing your story” and “We hear you.” The meeting concluded with the board postponing the vote, claiming that they needed to consider “the remarkable conversation we had today.”

Chairman of the board, Rick Miller, told a group of students after the meeting that they “should expect tuition to be raised at the next meeting in two weeks” but assured them “it probably won’t be as high as originally proposed.” Miller also admitted the coming vote would be held in a teleconference, with no outside participation.

Only about 30 students, a small fraction of the university population, attended the board meeting to voice their anger against the tuition hikes. The majority of students are alienated from the political process, dealing with the challenges of balancing school and work with many having no knowledge that the tuition hikes have even been proposed.

After the Board of Trustees meeting, members of the IYSSE spoke with the broader student body about their response to the growing crisis in education.

Kenneth, an undergraduate student, reacted to the Board’s decision by saying “it’s easier for them to have a closed meeting and not publicize it, because then you can just make the change with no push back.” He

argued that the state legislators and university administrators are cutting education funding “to put money in their pocket” and that they “just don’t care” about the burdens students are facing. “I think that the part of the reason for the cuts is to dumb down society.” Pointing to the unprecedented levels of inequality he said, “each year, each decade you can see that the top 1 percent has more and more money while the bottom 50 percent has less and less.”

“I believe education is a human right because at the end of the day as humans, we are meant to grow mentally, physically and emotionally, and this is the mental aspect of it,” he asserted. “We don’t learn just from books, but we learn from other people. And we learn to have conversations that are uncomfortable.”

Kenneth supported the proposal for an independent movement of the working class to defend democratic rights, such as education, saying “I don’t vote because it’s too corrupt. Things have not changed regardless if it’s been a Democrat or Republican... You can’t fix [the system] from within, you have to actually destroy it.”

Duane, a science student, explained, “I don’t think education should be treated as a capitalist business like it is currently. I believe everyone has the right to an education.” Duane agreed with the need to link up the struggles of students and teachers: “We need to not only unify the struggles but we need to demand that education be funded. They aren’t going to just give it to us. It is our money after all that we are asking to be used for education.”

Susanna, an English major originally from Texas, told the IYSSE that she opposes the tuition hikes and the efforts to divide teachers and students. She said the increase will affect her already difficult financial situation. “It’s hard to get involved in the protests because I am already busy trying to work to pay tuition and complete my coursework.”

Susanna came to Oregon because she thought the schools offered a higher quality education than in Texas. “I quickly realized that to complete my education would require that I take on much more debt than I imagined, even with my scholarships.” Susanna explained that even with her part time job and her \$4,000 scholarship she has racked up \$10,000 of debt in her first year alone. She explained the impact these costs have on her life, “I can’t go on trips. I can’t travel home to see my family. It’s difficult to pay rent.

I have been wondering lately if getting an education is worth it and if I made the right decision in going to school.”

Susanna said that she decided to go to school later in life after working for years as a nanny and later in the service industry. “I make much more money in the service industry than I would with most of the entry level jobs I will be offered coming out of school but that isn’t the job that I want.”

She also spoke about the ongoing teachers revolt around the country and internationally. “Teachers go to school and get degrees to do their jobs. They don’t deserve to be denied a livable wage and basic needs. In Texas, teachers are very underpaid. I think they make near minimum wage if you consider how much they work. The education system suffers from this because teachers can’t do their jobs well if they are worried about surviving.”

Millions of college students confront the same social forces behind their dire conditions while they seek a stable job and better future. Students must reject the notion that their own right to education will be granted at the expense of instructor salaries, new buildings and repairs, or student-led programming. Instead, it will be essential that students turn toward the campus faculty and workers to defend higher pay and adequate funding for high quality education. As teachers have proven in Oklahoma, Kentucky and West Virginia, a working-class battle to defend basic rights will gather momentum among broad sections of workers across the country and world.

What the ruling class fears most is a mass movement of the working class, backed by wide layers of students, in defense of democratic rights. Such a movement would necessarily confront the political, financial and military establishment, which does not have the ability to resolve the social crisis. Instead, they are turning towards more open forms of censorship, police repression and war.



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