

Drastic cuts to Rochester, New York schools

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20 January 2020

Students in Rochester, New York have returned to the city's classrooms in the aftermath of an abrupt mid-year layoff of 95 teachers, largely affecting elementary students. Overall, more than 150 teachers were displaced. The Rochester City School District (RCSD) announced the cuts on December 6, stating that they would be effective at the end of the calendar year.

Young people and city residents are incensed. On December 9, hundreds of students walked out of classrooms at numerous schools and marched through downtown chanting "We want our teachers" and "Chop from the top."

The RCSD claims the job cuts are the result of overspending by \$64 million during the past two fiscal years. Increased expenses associated with special education, healthcare insurance costs and proliferating charter school outfits were brought to light last September by a year-end audit. The district has now pledged to balance the budget and neither the state nor the city has offered assistance. Therefore, the full brunt of cuts will fall on the city's schools, its teachers and students.

Attempting to take measures into their own hands, parents launched a GoFundMe page with the aim of raising \$10 million to be applied to preserving the jobs of the teachers. A change.org petition, now with over 22,000 signatories, also calls for New York State to pay a reputed debt of \$86 million to the district.

The petition says the layoffs are "unacceptable," emphasizing that the city has the third-highest child poverty rate in the US. A staggering 51.9 percent of Rochester children under 18 are officially living in poverty. These cuts will have a further devastating impact on the lives of children and their families.

A group of students staged a "State of the Students" address January 13, rebutting Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo's "State of the State" the week prior. "We expected the worst and learned the worst," said

East High eighth-grader Sarah Adams, telling the media, "Our voices and our education [are] not a priority for him."

The long-time Democratic governor's speech emphasized his willingness to address a \$6.1 billion state budget deficit. Far from advancing desperately needed cash for schools, he is widely expected to enact cuts to both Medicaid and school aid.

Cuomo, long the darling of Wall Street hedge funders and speculators, has brazenly rejected significant tax increases on the wealthy and has cautioned that the super-rich are fleeing New York for lower-taxed states. New York State has the second greatest share of billionaire residents with 113 of the US's 639 billionaires.

Nearby Upstate New York cities Syracuse and Buffalo face conditions similar to Rochester, with youth poverty rates of 46.8 and 47.2 percent, respectively, following years of deindustrialization and job cuts, especially at Kodak and Xerox. Unemployment has been compounded by a recent cascade of plant closures throughout the region. Corporations that once received lavish hand-outs in the form of millions of dollars of tax subsidies authorized by Democrats and Republicans alike have simply pulled up stakes. Impoverished communities have been left to deal with the consequences.

For its part, the Rochester Teachers Association eschewed strike action over the layoffs and sought to channel anger behind appeals to the millionaire governor and the Democrats. Far from making a stand on defending jobs, the RTA website asks, "Thinking of retirement?" and provides assistance on retiring and getting unemployment.

On January 14, the union organized three busloads of parents, teachers, students and members of the board of education to petition Cuomo in Albany. The governor's office doors were locked when they arrived. Students

and other protestors left pink slips and messages.

Meanwhile, school district superintendent Terry Dade has now doubled down, indicating he will demand at least \$7 million in further concessions from teachers. Teacher Rakia Hardaway told WHAM she fears these cuts are just the beginning. “We have kids walking around asking us, ‘Are you going to be safe? When are you going to leave?’” said Hardaway. “Also for us, we don’t know if we’re going to have a job.”

As he has done with similar teacher struggles this primary season, Democratic Party candidate Bernie Sanders sent a boilerplate message of support to Rochester teachers. He tweeted, “I am proud to stand with students in Rochester who are fighting proposed teacher layoffs. I urge government officials to keep these educators in their classrooms. Together, we will invest in public education and reduce class sizes.”

This empty statement, which dares not mention the role of fellow Democrat Cuomo, commits the nominal “socialist” Sanders to nothing. His claims to advocate “a national minimum salary of \$60,000 for educators... combat privatization by eliminating school voucher programs and placing a moratorium on the expansion of charter schools” are entirely demagogic.

Sanders, like Elizabeth Warren who has made similar statements, is fully aware that the vast majority of their own Democratic Party would oppose even slight tampering with the voracious profits of Wall Street. From the period of the Clintons in the 1990s on, not just Cuomo but the Democratic Party as a whole has championed “school choice,” the diversion of public funding to charter and private schools, while implementing massive cuts to public education.

It is time for educators, parents and students everywhere to draw a balance sheet on the capitalist system itself and the long record of both the Democratic and Republican parties in the decades-long assault on social rights. There can be no solution to the education crisis without a break with the pro-capitalist trade unions, the independent organization of the working class, and a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth of the financial oligarchy. In other words, the defense of public education today requires an end to the profit system and the fight for genuine socialism. Sign up for the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter* and get involved today.



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