

New York City mayor announces \$827 million in cuts to public education

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On Thursday, New York City's Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio announced the city was making massive budget cuts due to a steep fall in revenue brought about the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the \$2 billion in cuts, some \$827 million will be cut from the Department of Education (DOE), far more than the \$273 million in cuts announced by the DOE on April 7.

The cuts are among the earliest of a broad assault on public education funding now being discussed across the US, including in California, Colorado, Nevada, Michigan, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, and many other states. In the coming months, virtually every state will further slash education funding due to a decline in tax revenues stemming from mass unemployment. While funneling trillions of dollars to Wall Street, they will repeat the constant refrain that "there is no money" for the social needs of the working class.

The New York City school system, which teaches 1.1 million students—70 percent of whom are poor, including 114,000 homeless students—will be devastated by the immense cuts. Recovering from the emergency measures taken during the pandemic will now be virtually impossible.

In a letter to staff on Thursday, Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza said that the cuts include, "all non-essential, non-mandated DOE activities, including training, overtime, and materials at schools, central and field offices."

The cuts will wipe out civics programs and health certification programs for teachers. There will be reductions in counseling for students and cuts in after-school programs that will be necessary to help students catch up when they return to their buildings next year. Even funds for the installation of air conditioners and the control of rat infestations will be cut.

In addition, the DOE has ordered schools to immediately stop spending funds on any budget line not directly related to the coronavirus. This has caused widespread confusion since the DOE has issued no guidelines as to what constitutes this kind of spending.

On Saturday, de Blasio announced that further cuts were

coming to the city unless federal aid was forthcoming. At his Sunday press conference, Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo said, "If we don't get federal assistance, you're looking at education cuts of close to 50 percent in the state of New York, where school districts would only get half of the aid they got from the state last year."

One teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "As far as I know, we will not lose any teachers to the cuts, but will lose per session activities. I may not be able to continue after-school clubs. We will also lose professional development opportunities.

"If the cuts affect coaching, which I'm pretty sure they do, then it looks like sports will be affected.

"And yes, larger class sizes look like they'll be a huge issue. Supplies also. Some teachers are anticipating having to buy more supplies with their own money. I just raised the funds to acquire material for an outdoor project, but without per session opportunities, I don't know how we will be able to fully utilize them."

The situation in New York City is a concentrated expression of the class character of the government's response to the pandemic. While cutting hundreds of millions from education spending, de Blasio has sanctioned the federal government's funneling of trillions of dollars to the financial institutions of Wall Street.

Michael Mulgrew, the president of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), has accepted the budget cuts in principle. He has merely disputed where the cuts are to come from and suggested that the unions should be involved in budget-cutting decisions.

He said: "We all know there are tough budget times ahead, and new sources of revenue have to be found. But according to its own filing with the state, the New York City school system spends more than \$6 billion every year on Central Administration. To the extent that DOE cuts become necessary, that's the first place the city should be looking."

The DOE's Central Administration includes physicians, administrative assistants, an office of Continuing and Adult Education and other essential services. Would the UFT

propose those workers lose their jobs? Suggesting the possibility that other DOE workers besides teachers should pay the price of cuts is deeply reactionary.

The real concern of his criticism was apparent when he said: “I don’t think cuts should be made without talking to the stakeholders ... who is making that decision? Right now [the Office of Management and Budget] is making the decision—and they don’t have to deal with the impact.”

It is precisely the job of the UFT to “deal with the impact” of these cuts and of the pandemic itself, which will invariably arise in the form of mass opposition by teachers to the whole political establishment. It is the UFT that will attempt to quell that dissent and redirect it toward support for the Democratic Party.

The UFT is politically responsible for the de Blasio administration’s disastrous response to the pandemic. The organization, along with Bill and Hillary Clinton, endorsed de Blasio in his 2013 bid for mayor and again in 2017. Randi Weingarten, head of the UFT’s national affiliate, the American Federation of Teachers, organized a fundraiser for de Blasio in January of that year, tickets for which ranged from \$1,000 to \$4,950 a person.

As one New York educator told the WWSWS, “None of these guys dare to propose even a tax on the oligarchy as a minimum measure.”

The top management of the DOE is corrupt and incompetent. Last week the city announced an investigation into a leaked memo from the DOE that was initially exposed by the online publication the *City* on April 2. The memo, issued to school staff, cautioned them not to report suspected cases of coronavirus in schools to the city’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH).

“At the moment, there is no reason for any school to call DOHMH to report potential or confirmed cases. DOHMH is receiving information about positive test results strictly from laboratories. We can support our colleagues at DOHMH by keeping their phones clear to speak with laboratories.”

The city investigation is meant to determine whether the DOE was concealing information about a spread of the virus in the schools, although it is likely that it will exonerate top administrators. The memo was issued on March 10, at a time de Blasio was “extremely reluctant” to close the city’s schools, despite the advice of epidemiologists. On one occasion he told the media that he was hesitating because, “If you’re under 50 and you’re healthy, which is most New Yorkers, there’s very little threat here.”

One teacher on social media commented on the memo: “Not surprised at all. My principal was going classroom to classroom addressing students, which is very out of character, telling them to keep coming to school...even the Friday before school closures. This is instead of meeting

with [Assistant Principals] coming up with solid plans for the inevitable remote learning process. Hearing the mayor on the news that week justifying schools being open due to attendance rates even being higher this year than that date from the previous year was disgusting. I hope there is accountability, top-down.”

Accountability for this criminal policy, and for the disastrous impact the pandemic has had, will only be found in a struggle by teachers and workers independently of the Democratic Party. While De Blasio and Cuomo have caused a higher death toll due to their subordination of public health to private profit, they are only the latest in a long line of Democrats that have worked with Republicans to oversee a massive growth in social inequality over the past 40 years, while cutting health care funding and starving public education at the federal, national and city levels for decades. Both politicians and their party have pushed forward the privatization of education through the funding of charter schools.

Teachers, parents and students need a socialist perspective to fight what will become the greatest historical assault on public education. Teachers must organize rank-and-file committees apart from the UFT, and fight for independent political and industrial action that will redistribute trillions of dollars from the ruling class to the needs of the working class for housing, healthcare and education.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges teachers to carefully study the program advanced by the SEP (US) to fight the pandemic and its repercussions, and to attend the International May Day Online Rally on May 2 to discuss a global perspective for defending the social rights of the working class.



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