With minimal federal relief, US states plan huge cuts to public education

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As states across the US process the massive economic shock from the COVID-19 pandemic, Democratic and Republican state politicians are preparing unprecedented budget cuts to all the vital social programs upon which the working class depends. In this restructuring of class relations, a chief target in the crosshairs of the ruling class is K-12 public education, which they intend to dismantle and privatize to the greatest extent possible.

Already, the impact of the pandemic has thoroughly undermined state budgets. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) think tank estimates that state budget shortfalls for the current fiscal year will reach roughly 10 percent, and surpass 25 percent for fiscal year 2021, based on projections that are constantly in flux due to the unpredictable nature of the pandemic. The decline in state budget funding is a direct product of the growth of mass unemployment and the shutdown of businesses due to necessary social distancing measures, as states rely primarily on income and sales tax to fund social programs.

A tiny minority of the trillions of dollars contained in the federal bailout packages passed so far has been earmarked for social services, including merely $30.75 billion for K-12 and higher education out of the initial $2.5 trillion CARES Act, or 1.23 percent. While Democrats such as Nancy Pelosi posture as fighting to ameliorate the crisis facing the states with the next bailout package, it remains to be seen what, if any, relief is actually provided for state budgets and public education.

As with the 2008 financial collapse and ensuing bailout of Wall Street, the working class is once again being told “there is no money” to provide for its needs. Rather, workers are told to sacrifice their own lives to ensure the profits of the corporations and the financial elite as part of a reckless back-to-work campaign being spearheaded by the Trump administration.

As a result of the budget shortfalls, numerous states have announced sweeping cuts to education spending, a foretaste of what is to come as the pandemic once again spirals out of control in the coming weeks and months.

The most drastic cuts announced so far came yesterday, when California’s Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom announced that the state faces a $54.3 billion deficit through fiscal year 2021, nearly 37 percent of the state’s total general fund budget. The state projects an $18 billion decrease in minimum funding guaranteed for K-12 schools and community colleges. As *Politico* notes, “The state survived the Great Recession by cutting nearly every program and adopting accounting tricks such as delaying state worker pay by a day.” This time, far more drastic measures will be undertaken.

In Ohio, Republican Governor Mike DeWine announced Tuesday that he is cutting $775 million from the state budget in the coming two months, before the end of this fiscal year. This will include $355 million from K-12 schools, $110 million from higher education, $210 million from Medicaid spending, and up to $100 million from all state government agencies except for the Department of Corrections, which oversees state prisons.

At the start of the month, finance officials in Georgia sent a letter to all state agencies instructing them to make plans to cut 14 percent from their budgets for the coming fiscal year, which would amount to $1.4 billion in cuts to K-12 public education spending.

In North Dakota, Republic Governor Doug Burgum announced May 1 that he intends to cut K-12 education funding by 15 percent during the upcoming fiscal year.

Last month, state agencies across Oregon were instructed to prepare to implement cuts of 8.5 percent to their budgets. In Hawaii, Democratic Governor David Ige proposed cutting the salaries of all state workers, including public school teachers, by 20 percent. Denver Public Schools officials announced that they could lose from $19 million to $61 million in state funding next year, as the state expects to lose roughly $3 billion in overall funding.

In April, New York City’s Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio announced plans for $2 billion in budget cuts, of which some $827 million will be cut from the Department of Education (DOE). New York Governor Andrew Cuomo threatened that, barring federal assistance, he would impose up to 50 percent cuts to education spending statewide, which would amount to an incredible $17.85 billion.

As soon as states began to shut down in mid-March, politicians saw the opportunity to slash education spending. In March, the Kentucky State Senate passed a budget bill that that withheld $1.3 billion from teacher pension funding, while demanding cuts to retirement benefits for newly hired teachers. In Tennessee, Republican Governor Bill Lee scrapped a $250 million proposal to provide mental health services in schools, along with a planned pay raise for teachers. Similar plans to increase education funding were shelved in Maryland and Wisconsin in March, while teacher pay raises were scaled back in Florida and Georgia.

In addition to the savage budget cuts, the pandemic has highlighted the growing instability of retired teachers' pension funds, which since the 1980s have been increasingly tied to hedge funds, private equity firms and the machinations of Wall Street more broadly. Throughout this period, teachers' pensions have become woefully underfunded, as states and school districts withheld payments or borrowed from retirement funds, and a growing number of elderly teachers retired without any corresponding increase in education funding.

Since 2001, unfunded liabilities for teacher pensions across the US have ballooned from $21 billion to $642 billion today. Due to the insufficient growth in overall education spending, these liabilities have been used by states to erode funding for teacher salaries, classroom resources and other educational expenses.

As the pandemic took hold in the US and the stock market plunged, public pension funds lost close to $1 trillion in value. While this figure has rebounded with the stock market, another downward plummet will again saddle states with huge liabilities that will be used to justify further cuts to education spending.

Chad Aldeman, a senior associate partner for Bellwether Education Partners, told *Education Week* that states are planning to make significant adjustments to public pension plans, stating, "Given all the pressure that's going on, a bunch of states, including Kentucky, have already been talking about this. There will be similar discussions in other places when they're handed that bill."

The state budget crisis is also severely impacting higher education, with a recent poll of college administrators showing that over half anticipate cutting staff positions in the coming months. Already, hundreds of staff have been laid off and thousands furloughed at public colleges and universities across the US since mid-March.

The University of California at Berkeley has said that it expects to lose $200 million in funding, while colleges and universities across the US are bracing for similar drastic cuts. As noted by the *Washington Post*, "During the Great Recession, state higher education funding was cut by 19 percent, a number that rose to 28 percent when factoring in enrollment growth." These figures will be dwarfed by the coming wave of cuts.

As public higher education budgets are slashed, there will be ever-growing demands by administrators to raise tuition costs to make up for lost revenues, thus greatly expanding the astronomical levels of student loan debt. This process also unfolded following the 2008 crash, with student loan debt rising from $660 billion in September 2008 to $1.6 trillion today.

The pandemic has starkly exposed the class relations that exist in the US and internationally. While over 1,250,000 people have become infected and over 75,000 have died in the US, the country's billionaires amassed $406 billion from March 18 to April 29, as a result of the multitrillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street through the CARES Act.

Not a single politician has raised the notion that the rich should be made to pay for either the immediate costs of fighting the pandemic, or the long-term economic devastation that is forecast to come. Instead, the massive economic dislocation is being used by the Trump administration and state governments to justify an unsafe return to work, under conditions in which the daily increase in cases and deaths are on the rise, and local health care systems are at or near capacity across much of the US.

The back-to-work drive has been wholeheartedly endorsed by the pro-corporate unions, including the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) under Randi Weingarten, who rakes in over half a million dollars a year. Through their "Plan to Safely Reopen America's Schools and Communities," the AFT pledges to assist in "reopening school buildings" so that "parents, who work outside the home, can go to work," acknowledging that this "is the key to the reopening of the broader economy."

The AFT has no concern for the safety or interests of educators and students, but rather ensuring that workers are forced back to work to satisfy the voracious appetite of Wall Street. This plan will cost the lives of teachers, parents and students, and must be rejected.

Since the statewide wildcat strike launched by West Virginia teachers in 2018, more than 700,000 educators have engaged in a series of strikes across the US, demanding wage increases and the expansion of public education spending. The chief obstacle facing teachers in each of these struggles, and in the present, is the unions. To protect teachers and students and prepare a struggle against the impending onslaught of budget cuts, all educators must form independent, rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood. The resistance of educators must be developed into a fight to unite every section of the working class in a struggle for socialism and a radical redistribution of society's wealth.