

“A large-scale struggle and strong opposition is needed”

CUNY students and faculty call for resistance to layoffs and cuts

Elliott Murtagh
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The City University of New York (CUNY) recently laid off 2,800 adjunct professors, slashed hours and pay of part-time staff, and cut hundreds of academic classes in response to both implemented and impending cuts in funding due to the pandemic-triggered state and city financial crisis.

While an update on the extent of the state budget cuts from Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo is still pending, Mayor Bill de Blasio and the Democratic-controlled New York City Council recently cut over \$112 million from CUNY’s budget. Fifty-three percent of CUNY’s funding is from New York state aid and 16 percent is from city support, while 19 percent is from student tuition.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with students and faculty at CUNY about these cuts and their effects, as well as the way forward.

Kristen, an advanced doctoral student in the environmental psychology program at CUNY’s Graduate Center, noted that these layoffs are taking place in the middle of a deadly pandemic and an economy dominated by unemployment. “The layoffs threaten people’s ability to care for themselves with housing, food, health care” and “may also affect mental health.”

“I am worried about people, including myself. I personally am trying to work through my dissertation work, have no work lined up after August, no way to pay for my housing after December, and am sitting under a lot of student debt. I am very worried about my future.”

Kristen strongly opposes a rush for CUNY’s campus to reopen amidst the health dangers of COVID-19, stressing that reopening requires “people to take public transit and sit in closed spaces with others—two of the most dangerous places to be right now. Requiring people to do that would be a form of state-sanctioned violence. Already, I hope that one day we are able to hold current officials accountable for the mass death their negligence and bad decisions have caused.”

On the possibility of paying full tuition for online courses, Kristen thought that this raised a larger question about why students at a public university are paying tuition at all.

While she strongly supports the rehiring of adjuncts and the reversal of cuts, Kristen fears that these are “a short-term

solution to the much larger problem of our exploitative capitalist political economy.” She stated that real harm was taking place in higher education before the pandemic and hopes that the widespread anger and fear over these cuts is channeled into a “fight for deeper and broader structural changes that ultimately will lift all of us up.”

“My hope is that those experiencing fear around all of this right now are able to come to the larger questions about our society and fight on that collective basis.” Kristen emphasized the need to unite across different areas of struggle, because “while our grievances may be different, they are all connected.” She added, “I totally support independent rank-and-file committees.”

“It’s devastating,” said a rising senior at the College of Staten Island studying media and design, who preferred to remain anonymous, about the adjunct layoffs and cuts. “Adjunct faculty make up a huge proportion of my department, and to see them axed just like that is beyond heartbreaking. Adjuncts work very hard for very little pay as it is.”

She said the effects of these cuts and layoffs will be widespread and long-lasting. “Students and their families are going to suffer from this. Fewer faculty members mean fewer course offerings and larger class sizes, which in turn impacts the quality of education students are receiving.”

She mentioned the recent CUNY demonstrations and petitions opposing these cuts, and emphasized that, going forward, “We need to unite all the CUNY campuses under a common cause. There are so many people in CUNY, and we need to take advantage of our numbers” and “remind students that these cuts will affect them greatly.”

Commenting on the fact that these austerity measures are coming from the leadership of the Democratic Party through Governor Cuomo and Mayor De Blasio, she said, “They are our opponents in this struggle. It was our mayor who proposed the cuts to CUNY ASAP [Accelerated Study in Associate Programs]. And we also have our governor working with Bill Gates to ‘reimagine education,’ which makes me think he’s always been trying to push CUNY to be fully online—this pandemic may just be the catalyst he needed.”

Aisha, a second-year graduate student in education at Baruch College whose name was changed for the sake of anonymity, said that laying off thousands of adjuncts leading to class overcrowding is not an acceptable solution.

“A first-level microeconomics class at Baruch or biology class at Hunter has over 100 students. As a result of the layoffs, we can only expect the quality of education to go down and create an unfathomable workload that faculty would have to bear across all course levels.”

In response to these cuts targeting the school’s most vulnerable—"the adjuncts, part-time staff, college assistants, lab assistants, office aids, mail-room staff and graduate assistants"—Aisha said that “a large-scale struggle and strong opposition is needed,” and that “this will be a continuous struggle for many.”

Aisha also raised the Democratic-controlled state and city governments, saying, “These two governments are failing CUNY and making access to public education difficult for low-income and marginalized students by imposing their own agendas and supporting yearly tuition increase.”

Aisha spoke about how the amount of student loans is soaring in the trillions of dollars without sufficient relief, and that students across the country place no trust in the government. “Education is not the priority of this [presidential] administration nor the past administrations.

“The federal bailout clearly shows a prioritization of businesses such as airlines and corporations over health and education,” When asked about the country’s rush to reopen and force workers back to work, she said this demonstrated a prioritization of, “capital over human capital.”

KC, a professor at Brooklyn College who teaches twentieth century US political, diplomatic, and legal history, said that reducing the number of courses CUNY offers “will clearly have a negative effect—especially since current enrollment trends show relatively stable enrollment figures.”

KC also shared health concerns about reopening campus. “Students and faculty are reaching campus overwhelmingly via either the subway or bus, and thus collectively encounter many thousands of people before they even set foot on campus. Under the circumstances, I don’t see how full on-campus instruction could be safe in the fall.”

KC laid primary responsibility for the cuts on Governor Cuomo, “who has been at best indifferent and at worst hostile to CUNY since assuming office.” He also sharply critiqued the Professional Staff Congress, CUNY’s faculty and staff union, saying, “The union’s ineffectiveness, which in prosperous times has served CUNY faculty poorly, has had tragic consequences in recent months.”

“[PSC president Barbara] Bowen,” he said, “has embraced performative tactics—a ‘car caravan’ protest, an agreement with CUNY to delay the inevitable non-reappointment letters—that have had no practical effect. In coming weeks, Bowen doubtless will start issuing vague strike threats, but she’s done

that so many times during her two decades running the union that no one takes her threats seriously anymore.”

While KC supports the interests of both full-time and part-time faculty, he brought up how they often conflict under the current structure. Being at CUNY since 1999, he stated that, aside from research support becoming non-existent and workload increasing, the much-needed adjunct pay hikes have been at the expense of stagnating wages for full-time faculty and that adjunct health care benefits have been won by shifting funds from and weakening the full-time faculty’s Welfare Fund.

Tom, an undergraduate student studying computer science at Hunter College, said that “there have been many cuts to CUNY over the years, and I’m opposed to all of them.” He emphasized that “there can’t be a better investment to make than in public education.”

Tom, who is 59, described how crowded the Hunter campus is and how he has serious health concerns about returning to in-person classes should the campus re-open. If it does, he thought that courses should be an in-person/online hybrid, and students and faculty should be given a choice as to whether to attend in person.

Asked about the way in which the US government has responded to the pandemic and the current rush to reopen, Tom said, “It’s dreadful. Those who still have to work are at the bottom of the economic ladder and so they are basically told, ‘We don’t care if you die, just do your job.’ They’re looked on as literal pawns who are going into battle—if they die, another row of pawns will replace them.”

Tom also spoke about his frustration with the general state of the economy. “Nobody would design the economy that we have now. Nobody wants this number of poor and homeless people, especially given the fact that there is enough money and enough food for everyone—it’s just in the wrong pockets. We need change.”

He added, “But one of the silver linings of the pandemic is that it is exposing how broken things are.”



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