

The New School lays off 122 staff, sparking community protest

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On October 2, The New School (TNS) in New York City announced the layoff of 122 members, or 13 percent, of its administrative staff, citing financial pressures. The private university, which was founded on the need to “solve the most pressing social issues of our time,” gave fired staff just one week’s notice before their positions were terminated. This action coincided with the elimination of 80 open positions and follows course reductions, pay cuts, a suspension of retirement contributions, and a freezing of research funds done earlier this year.

In response to these austerity measures, students, faculty and staff have demanded that the layoffs be rescinded and have organized protest rallies, teach-ins, and e-mail campaigns in support of those laid off, who the community say are essential.

TNS has pointed to a revenue shortfall of \$130 million due to decreased enrollment, but according to a finance note released by the university the layoffs are only projected to save \$5 million this fiscal year. Confronted with these figures, many have pointed to and critiqued TNS President Dwight McBride’s over \$1 million salary and his living in a \$15 million townhouse owned by the school. An open letter sent to the administration by students in the Economics Department stated that the worth of the president’s residence would pay the salary of their department’s recently fired administrator for 340 years.

In August, TNS announced the hiring of Huron Consulting—a corporate consultancy firm with direct ties to the Enron scandal and a track record of implementing large-scale layoffs at universities—to help the school undergo extensive “reimagining.” Less than two months later, the content of this reimagining has become clear.

In a “Workforce Reductions FAQ” released after the layoff announcement, TNS administration stated, “Unless we address our financial challenges—and address them now in this way—it will be harder, if not impossible, to protect and ultimately extend our core academic mission.” According to this logic, the ramming through of mass layoffs and austerity is necessary to carry out TNS’s mission of confronting dire

social problems.

Opposition to these actions has been widespread, including an outpouring of letters in support of terminated staff, an open letter by the University Student Senate with more than 600 signatures, the creation of an umbrella organization of all employee unions on campus, and a protest rally organized by economics students outside TNS that drew roughly 100 attendees, including students from CUNY and Columbia University.

Silvina, a senior secretary in the Economics Department who was fired in the wave of layoffs, wrote a public letter to the TNS community emphasizing the need for unified opposition, writing, “In order to survive what is coming, you must stand united, and include the undergraduates too. ... Remember, the easy way to defeat you is to divide you. So don’t allow it.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with students from TNS about the current situation.

Alyssa, a New School student whose name was changed to protect her anonymity, said that these layoffs “go directly against the New School principles of solving the most pressing social issues of our time.”

Alyssa commented that in addition to the layoffs, “the administration is abruptly cutting positions that, although little in number, are nonetheless made for students, such as Teaching Fellowships. Entire courses have been ‘cancelled’ in a random selection that directly affect the students’ capacity of making ends meet in one of the most expensive cities in the world.”

In relation to this recent austerity, Alyssa also brought up that in the spring, “when the pandemic numbers in New York City were beginning to grow in massive numbers of deaths per day, the administration decided to furlough the Health Services staff, leaving students with no place to go, not even in case of needing counseling. This Health Services, which does not exist anymore, is still being charged to students that must pay out of pocket. Furthermore, as an international student, we are required to hold a health insurance policy so very expensive for the very

small number of conditions that it covers.”

Alyssa added that TNS community is being brought together and unifying in struggle against these actions by the administration, but emphasized that “All of these restructuring measures have only created despair and anxiety among the student community.”

Marc, a graduate student at TNS in the Economics Department, knows and has worked with two of the staff members who were laid off—one in Student Life and the other in the Economics Department—describing both as “integral to the functioning of their departments.”

Marc added, “It just shows how little the administration either knows or cares to know about how the department functions. It’s going to have a really adverse impact not only on these workers—who lose their salary, their pension, and their health care during a pandemic—but also for the faculty because they won’t have any help with their administrative duties, which means that they won’t be able to focus as much on their own research or helping students with their research, or teaching, and this will cause the students to suffer as well.

“The administration’s decision sends this message that they don’t really give a damn about social justice, because what’s more unjust than firing 122 people amidst a pandemic? Especially when there were so many other avenues for them to make up for a budget shortfall, like selling some real estate. It just seems like this administration just doesn’t really care about workers or faculty or students.”

Marc was one of the organizers of the protest rally outside TNS and commented on this demonstration, saying, “We felt like we needed to make a statement, especially as students who weren’t necessarily workers, and we feel very strongly that there needs to be a mobilization effort around these issues. We felt like students needed an outlet with everything going on to vent their frustration and their outrage at the University’s hypocrisy.”

Marc anticipates more of these demonstrations if the administration continues to ignore the demands of students, faculty, and workers. He stated, “Students came here because of the school’s vision and aspirations, but when you compare that to what the Board of Trustees and administration are doing in practice, it feels like you’re participating in a sham. We [the students] are funding the whole operation and we want to have a voice.”

Addressing the broader situation, he said, “You see this austerity in higher education all across the US right now, and this is a clear example that under capitalism everything is subordinated to the profit imperatives. Under this kind of logic, education will become less about providing people with tools that promote human flourishing, because

ultimately it’s all about the money. And it really doesn’t have to be that way. These are all political choices, and I think that we can organize to change things.”

Marc spoke on the way forward, declaring, “I think it’s going to require building coalitions across universities because I think that it would be very easy to isolate a single university facing ‘restructuring.’ But if there is a broader movement across higher education, across workers, students, and faculty—even in the NYC area—I think that that could be really powerful.”

“At the rally, we connected with all these folks—CUNY and Columbia students, and even security guards at TNS—who are going through something similar. I think that it can be discouraging to see this happening everywhere, but at the same time it gives me a lot of hope because there’s all these people who have this shared oppression and I think that that can be this real force for unification and helping people to see that they’re not alone in this.”

Marc concluded by saying, “This whole scenario is just another example of how capitalism corrupts everything and how everything is corrupted by the imperative to make profits.” The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, fully supports the demand to rescind all layoffs at TNS and for students, faculty, educators, and staff to link up across campuses, nationally and internationally, to firmly oppose the wave of austerity in education and higher education.

The unsafe reopening of schools and colleges amid a raging global pandemic, paired with mass layoffs and austerity measures, sharply illustrates that under capitalism academic institutions operate based on financial interests above all. Only through the overthrow of capitalism and the implementation of a socialist economy to provide for the social needs of the working class will the universal right to free, high-quality education be secured.



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