

With backing of unions, Pennsylvania public universities to slash over 1,500 jobs

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The Board of Governors and chancellor of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) is moving forward with a restructuring plan that will merge six universities into two. The result will be the slashing of thousands of jobs and the erosion of the quality of education, even as tuition continues to rise.

PASSHE consists of 14 public universities across the state, enrolling over 95,000 students and employing over 11,000 workers and faculty. It ranks 48th in the nation in terms of public expenditure on higher education.

Enrollment in PASSHE has been decreasing since the Great Recession, declining by 21 percent, as students seek other opportunities to find careers without being weighed down with boatloads of debt. Last year, officials estimated revenue loss of \$52 million due to declining enrollment and refunds issued to students who refused to attend schools that unsafely reopened.

Cuts will happen at every university, including the to-be merged universities of Mansfield, Lock Haven and Bloomsburg on the one hand and California, Clarion and Edinboro on the other.

Sworn in by Democratic Governor Tom Wolf in 2019, the current chancellor, Dan Greenstein, a former employee of the public-education-attacking Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, said, “I’m talking about [a] fundamental transformation and redesign” of the state system. Last summer, the first round of cuts hit professors, adjuncts and school employees. According to the plan revealed at the end of last month, this was only the first bloodletting of the forthcoming jobs massacre.

According to a new study done by the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, 809 faculty positions will be

cut by 2023, reducing faculty staffing from the 2019 level of 5,069 to 4,260, a 16 percent cut. Combining those job cuts with non-teaching staff layoffs, at least 1,531 workers will be given their walking papers, resulting in a 14 percent decline in systemwide employment. The student-faculty ratio will skyrocket on average by 15 percent.

The most cuts will happen at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), where 383 workers will lose their jobs, followed by Edinboro University with 236 and Shippensburg University with 185. The impact will be felt in the university communities, with one report describing the effect of the merger “as comparable to the ongoing experiences in Pennsylvania with factory closures and job destruction.”

At no point has Greenstein proposed to cut his own pay and benefits or the large sums of cash university presidents receive, nor has he asked the state government to provide more funds for PASSHE. Greenstein’s annual salary is a \$380,000 a year, while university presidents make from the mid-\$250K to almost \$400K a year—4 to 6 times more than an average professor. The chancellor’s budget proposal for 2023 will reduce funding by \$44.2 million, compared to 2019 levels.

Students and parents hoping that tuition will become more affordable for working-class families won’t find anything in this draconian plan to reduce costs. According to the Northeast Proposed Implementation Plan Report, “one integration goal is to reduce the cost of degree attainment by 25%.” But, as the report then states, “This goal does not assume primarily a reduction in tuition.” Instead, it proposes to “reimburse student wages off-campus” and promote summer job opportunities.

The burden on families of sending their children to a

PASSHE school is well-known. The director of the Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center, Marc Stier, noted, “Those universities which were once the engines of social mobility in Pennsylvania have become much less effective at that task as tuition has gone up, making PASSHE schools less accessible to working people.” Moreover, as a percentage of median income for families, the cost of a Pennsylvania four-year-degree is now the second least affordable in the country, tying Alabama.

Far from defending the rank-and-file membership, the unions, have not moved one muscle to parry the blows coming from Greenstein and Wolf.

The American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 13, representing more than 65,000 in the state and more than 3,000 at PASSHE, issued a mildly written press release opposing the job cuts to save face with their rank-and-file members. At the same time, the union said it is “not opposed to any changes at all to the system” and “is ready to work with PASSHE leadership towards a better outcome for all involved.” To put this two-faced language differently, the unions plan to let job and benefit cuts happen if they can be equal partners in this new scheme.

The Association of Pennsylvania State College & University Faculties (APSCUF) staged an impotent online rally. Opening remarks were given by Jamie Martin, the president of APSCUF. Her indifference to the lives of educators and students was clearly stated when she attacked the “hybrid learning” model of Greenstein’s plan, and demanded a return to in-person learning. “We need face-to-face courses,” he stated.

Later in this talk session, she bragged about the amount of money she has saved PASSHE by offering early retirements, cutting benefits and firing workers: “I feel as if we’ve done quite a bit to help the system save money ... last year we offered an enhanced sick leave payout program ... the system came to us talking about the need to reduce number of faculty and we entered into an agreement with them. We had 258 total members retire. 219 of them received the incentive ... 39 didn’t. That will increase savings!”

She also touted the fact that APSCUF will save \$40 million dollars next year by forcing its members to take an early retirement, some of whom won’t receive the package, and that the last contract had a pay freeze and

a “significant number of members” were laid off. “We will continue to do what we can for cost savings!” she declared at the end.

An alternative exists outside the corporatist trade unions for those students, faculty and workers who want to fight this barbaric plan. It is the Pennsylvania Rank-and-File Safety Committee, part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which has been fighting to save the lives of educators, students and parents against the “herd immunity” policies of the ruling class.



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