Pennsylvania slashes over 1,500 higher education jobs with union support

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Last month, Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) Chancellor Daniel Greenstein gave his stamp of approval for a plan that will lay off thousands of workers and reduce the quality of education at the PASSHE.

The restructuring plan, approved on July 14, will merge six universities into two schools: California, Clarion and Edinboro on the one hand and Bloomsburg, Lock Haven and Mansfield on the other. It will lay off faculty members, reduce educational opportunities, and do nothing to alleviate the skyrocketing cost of tuition and the debt students will carry after graduation.

In addition, the overhaul includes a wholesale reduction in staff and other cost-saving measures, sparing no school. According to a recent study conducted by the Political Economy Research Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, more than 1,500 jobs will be axed, including 809 faculty and over 600 staff. These huge layoffs will have a cascading impact on local economies, as these small-to medium-sized towns rely on the universities to survive.

The PASSHE system comprises 14 public universities across the state and enrolls over 95,000 students primarily from working-class backgrounds, employing over 11,000 workers and faculty. Student enrollment has dropped by 21 percent since the 2008 financial crisis. The system lost roughly $52 million last year from continued enrollment declines and refunds issued to students who had refused to attend unsafe schools during the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The latest announcement will accelerate the crisis under conditions in which the pandemic is surging once again, with statewide daily new infections increasing by more than sevenfold in the past alone.

During the spring, Greenstein, who started his career attacking public education to ensure its profitability for shareholders at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, held a public comment session on July 14 at which many workers and faculty responded with an outpouring of condemnation.

Many comments noted the fact that Pennsylvania ranks 48th in the US in public expenditure on higher education, with the Democratic Party at the helm over the last two election cycles, while stressing the horrific, prolonged impact these cuts will have on the students who attend these schools.

One worker commented: “PASSHE was created to provide accessible, high quality university education ‘at the lowest possible cost to the students’ of the Commonwealth. The system has suffered ongoing defunding, with cuts totaling more than 30 percent in just over ten years resulting in PA dropping to 48th in the nation in public support for higher education.”

The comment adds, “Our students have paid the price due to this negligence. The average student borrower in the Commonwealth leaves college with over $38,500 in student loan debt, third highest in the nation.” It further notes that the plan “does nothing to address the real problem—lack of funding from the State” and will only result in savings of 0.002 percent in the PASSHE yearly budget.

A former faculty member also noted the loss of high-quality, unique educational courses that students will no longer have access to, stating: “We often hear back from former students about how well prepared they are for their jobs and their graduate school programs… These are courses designed specifically to give our students a head start for their future. We are losing what made our program special and attractive to students.”

Despite the immense support for the PASSHE

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system, the official union representing faculty members, the Association of Pennsylvania State College & University Faculties (APSCUF), has completely refused to block the imposition of this rotten agreement.

The huge chasm between the APSCUF and its members was sharply revealed by President Dr. Jamie Martin's own comments and reaction to the plan. Martin, without even a whimper of a protest at the July 14 meeting, refused to outline a plan in opposition to the cuts. Instead, she dutifully asked questions about how to implement the guidance of the plan as if it had already been fully enacted.

"Again, we recognize that some of these questions and concerns can't be answered or addressed today," she said. "We trust that when the answers come, and as additional feedback and suggestions are given, they will guide the plan moving forward…"

In fact, the consolidation of the six universities will begin in August 2022, with the new curriculum being finalized in August 2024, giving substantial time to organize resistance. That is, if that were the APSCUF's plan.

Martin brought her short capitulatory speech to an appropriate end by quoting the British conservative and bitter opponent of the working class, Winston Churchill, stating, "I hope that the plan considered today is 'not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.'"

The APSCUF is in no way willing to lead a fight again the layoffs of hundreds of teachers and the axing of courses. Rather, last April Martin disclosed her own role in the layoff of faculty members, cutting benefits, and forcing workers to take early retirement, exclaiming that she "will continue to do what we [she and the APSCUF apparatus] can for cost savings!"

Martin and the APSCUF have done nothing to mobilize faculty and students' mass anger at the restructuring plan. Instead, the union has acted as a consultant for Greenstein and the Board of Governors, allowing the rank-and-file membership to take unanswered blows squarely on the chin.

Rather than allowing their struggle to be boxed up and caged by the trade union bureaucracy, teachers, students and staff must form their own independent organizations of struggle, controlled by the rank and file. The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, democratically controlled by educators in the state and surrounding region, will work to fight this rotten agreement, while demanding the universal right to free, high-quality education, and jobs for faculty. We urge all PASSHE faculty and students who wish to take up a serious struggle to defend public education to sign up today to join and help build this committee.

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