

New York City teachers denounce savage school cuts

Sandy English, Jesse Thomas
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New York City educators: Make your voices heard! Use the form at the end of this article to tell us what you think of the budget cuts. Tell us about working conditions at your school. We will protect your anonymity.

In a major escalation of the social crisis in New York City, Democratic Mayor Eric Adams and the Democratic Party-controlled City Council have imposed a minimum of \$215 million in cuts to the city's public schools. The Fiscal Year 2023 budget, which begins in July, for the city is \$101 billion, \$31 billion of which are earmarked for education spending. Adams has said he will cut another \$150 million to the education budget next year.

The total size of the budget cuts has still not been revealed. City Comptroller Brad Lander estimates it could be \$469 million and told the City Council, "Dozens of schools are seeing cuts of over \$1 million."

Other estimates say the cuts could be over \$1 billion. Of the 1,600 schools in the system, 1,035 will see cuts.

Schools Chancellor David Banks claimed no educator would lose his or her job. Instead, teachers will be "excessed," meaning they will be paid until they find another position in the Department of Education (DOE). If an educator cannot be hired, they will be removed from the system.

"These cuts will destroy communities," one educator told the WSW. Some schools will excess over a dozen educators each, eliminating art and music classes and reducing other programs, leading to larger class sizes.

Adams and his enablers on the City Council have pointed to the 9.5 percent decline in student enrollment to justify their savage cuts. For more than two years of the pandemic, the DOE has refused to release and actively lied about enrollment figures in the schools. Even if it were true, however, the decline in enrollment is entirely due to the criminal response of the Democrats and Republicans to the pandemic, which prioritized corporate profit over human life.

Eric Adams and his predecessor, Bill de Blasio, with the connivance of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT),

abandoned all mitigations against the spread of the disease in schools, including social distancing, testing and adequate quarantining.

Across the country, more than 200,000 children have lost a parent or caregiver; at least 1,257 children under the age of 18 have died; and hundreds of thousands are suffering from Long COVID. Add to that the number of working class families who became homeless due to surging rent costs or just could not manage to get their children to school, and it is no surprise that large numbers of students in New York City and districts across the US fell through the cracks.

The school budget cuts amount to a second wave of attacks on New York City educators, students and parents. Their deliberately aggressive character becomes all the clearer when one considers that at least \$4.3 billion in federal pandemic funds given to the city remains unspent.

The budget cuts are only a down payment on an austerity drive by Adams. He has proposed annual wage increases of only 1.2 percent for city workers, including 200,000 educators whose contract expires in mid-September.

The cuts and the wage proposals have already provoked widespread anger among educators.

Michael, an excessed elementary school music teacher who teaches at a Brooklyn public school, spoke with the WSW and described the impact of the cuts.

"Excessing, as I understand it, is where teachers are still given their pay, but they're removed from their schools. They're required to show proof that they've been applying to jobs on the Open Market Hiring System (OMT) in order to get their checks. The OMT lists job openings that you can search by borough, by content area, and is open from the late spring until early August.

"If a teacher cannot find a position in this time they are expected to use a special portal available only for excessed teachers, where unfilled job openings will still be listed. Then, if they still have not found a job by September, they will be considered an ATR (Absent Teacher Reserve)—basically a floating substitute. ATR's are not placed with respect to their specialization, and they are still

expected to search for jobs on the open market. If an ATR continues to fail to find permanent placement after some time, they can be let go from the Department of Education entirely.”

“It goes hand in hand with Adams’ push to continue Bloomberg’s ‘Mayoral Control.’ Basically, communities will have way less say over how their districts and schools are run and the shots are called from up top.

“Counterintuitively, I feel as though in my particular situation, it’s worse than just being laid off. Instead of teaching what I’ve been studying and perfecting for years, I’m now beholden to whatever whims and regulations of the DOE bureaucracy. They don’t care if I’m being used most effectively for the educational needs of students as long as I’m filling a place which they deem is the most cost-efficient.

“My school is losing up to \$300,000. Programs which were in place to foster creative learning, such as music composition, are ending next year. It’s really a tragedy. I’m dreading having to tell my kids I won’t be teaching them next year.

“I’m also a parent, and there have been similar financial reallocations in both of my daughters’ schools. So I really feel the need to protest this new regime with everything I’ve got.

“I’m in shock at how this legislation got passed. This supposedly diverse, Democratic City Council somehow failed to stop this horrible attack on our communities. But it’s also in line with what is happening nationally. ... We have Democratic majorities everywhere, yet it seems like the only bills that are passing are right-wing ones. And when the Right wins, it wins big. The recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* is a case in point.

“I’ve tried to appeal to local politicians about this, and they’ve basically told me that the buck stops with the mayor. ... But they all voted to get this passed, so that just doesn’t quite add up. I’ve been encouraged by these same folks to leak a good ‘sob story’ to the press. In other words, they want me to cover for them in a situation that they have been responsible in creating.

“Other city council members I’ve talked to have made phony excuses, saying that they feel duped by the Mayor, or that they didn’t realize what was actually contained in the plan until after they approved it. Honestly, every teacher knows that if we did our jobs with even a fraction of that kind of carelessness, our jobs would be on the line in a second. ... But it’s not so with the politicians.

“Teachers have done everything they’ve been asked to do, from the moment the pandemic hit. And yet we’re now faced with this. It feels like a major stab in the back.”

When asked about the role of the New York City teachers

union, the United Federation of Teachers, Michael recalled his grim experiences with making appeals to the labor bureaucracy.

“Personally, the union has failed me time and time again. They basically do nothing. I don’t know how anyone could expect to be happy with them. In the past, when I’ve attempted to address difficult situations at work, I’ve even had my own principal ask me incredulously, ‘Is your union representative not doing anything about this?’ So that’s really saying something.

“I remember one time in my early teaching days that my administration tried to get me to teach a general music class to 50 students at a time. Anybody who teaches music understands if your class is an orchestra class, having that many kids is okay because they all have a part to play. But it’s a total abuse to try to use the provisions for ensemble classes in a more regular classroom situation.

“I was able to get a meeting with the district union rep. I showed up with my guitar in hand and before I even said a single word, he looked me and told me, ‘I cannot help you.’ He then said, ‘arts teachers are such a comparatively insignificant part of what we have to deal with on a daily basis. You need to just suck it up.’”

There is plenty of money for schools. New York City is home to the highest number of billionaires in the world, and the Biden administration is squandering billions on its reckless military confrontation with Russia and ultimately China. Opposition is growing everywhere to inflation, bipartisan austerity measures, the attack on democratic rights and the danger of World War III.

The WSWS urges New York City educators to expand the growing national and international network of rank-and-file educators committees to launch a counter-offensive to defend the right to high quality education for all.



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