

New York City Mayor Eric Adams presses forward on school funding attacks

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As the fight over school funding heats up this summer, New York City Mayor Eric Adams remains determined to move forward with a budget that effectively declares war on students and educators.

Last month Adams and the City Council agreed on a budget that slashes an estimated \$215 million from public schools, a dramatic decrease at a time when the social and educational needs of more than 900,000 school children in New York City have never been greater. The cuts could be worse than officially acknowledged, as an analysis by the city's comptroller pegged the expected losses from the budget agreement at \$469 million.

While Adams attributed the cuts to a pandemic-related enrollment drop, the New York City Department of Education is holding on to billions in unspent federal aid from the pandemic, which could more than offset the shortfall. But rather than directing resources on hand to support teachers and school children, the Democratic Party officials are redirecting funding to boost the already gargantuan police budget. The city increased its funding for the New York Police Department (NYPD) by a staggering \$442 million.

The Adams administration is far from unique in selectively targeting austerity to vital social services. The local process is mirrored nationally in the trillions of dollars handed over by both parties to financial interests amid the pandemic and the virtually unlimited funds mobilized for war. The Biden administration, which has offered no relief for skyrocketing inflation, suddenly discovered more than \$40 billion to carry out its proxy war against Russia in Ukraine on top of the nearly \$780 billion in annual military spending.

Adams's austerity program is, in fact, an opening shot in what is shaping up to be a major struggle over public education. As it stands, schools are facing an average reduction of \$400,000 each, though it varies widely, with some seeing increases and others experiencing seven-

figure losses. Schools throughout the city are scrambling to cope, preparing plans to cut positions, increase class sizes, and do away with non-core curriculum.

And Adams has indicated far deeper cuts are on the horizon. "We're about to fall off a financial cliff once the stimulus dollars run out," the mayor threatened.

This year's education budget also places an undetermined number of teachers in the vulnerable position of being "excessed." While not yet losing their jobs, excessed teachers no longer have a position at their previous school and are forced to apply for employment elsewhere in the district.

With the teachers' contract expiring in September, the Adams administration is calculating that increasing the vulnerability of teachers will help ram through concessions in the face of mounting disquiet. The administration is highly sensitive to the possibility of a rank-and-file rebellion to demand that wage increases keep pace with inflation, now running at over 9 percent, and is seeking leverage.

There is also legitimate suspicion among educators that Adams is seeking to undermine the public school system to accelerate the privatization of education. Adams received significant backing from charter school interests during his mayoral campaign last year, including \$6.3 million from a Political Action Committee run by veteran charter school operative Jenny Sedlis and funded by pro-charter billionaires Dan Loeb, Steven Cohen and Kenneth Griffin. Adams is also supported by the billionaire ex-mayor Michael Bloomberg, who last December, announced \$750 million for charter schools, supposedly to counter the failure of public schools during the pandemic. Bloomberg's initiative focuses on 20 metropolitan areas, including New York City.

The school budget cuts have sparked an outpouring of anger and opposition from educators, parents and students. Marcy, a teacher in Brooklyn, told the WWS,

“Public schools, for the nearly two decades that I’ve been in the system, have been extremely underfunded and ill-equipped to handle their day-to-day challenges. Has this been exacerbated in recent years? Perhaps so. This past school year has certainly rocked people, and it is a fact that young people now are experiencing rising rates of depression, anxiety, risk of suicide, etc. If anything, we need to be increasing funding to education right now.”

“The pandemic is obviously not over,” she added. “Tightening budgets in the midst of this shifting situation seems not only naïve but cruel.”

In the face of widespread outrage from teachers, parents and students, the political establishment in the city has responded with an extraordinary level of political theater. A leading role in this absurdist drama is played by the Democratic-dominated City Council, which now claims to oppose the agreement it passed just weeks ago. Last week, 41 of the 51 council members published an open letter calling on Mayor Adams to restore the cuts the council itself had previously authorized. At a rally on Monday, a stream of City Council members took to the podium to confess their sins. “We didn’t get it right,” Jennifer Gutiérrez, a council member for a district spanning northern Brooklyn and Queens, said. “I’m angry at myself that I didn’t do more to stop it. And I’m sorry to every parent, to every teacher, to every student in my community,” Lincoln Restler from Greenpoint, Brooklyn, told the audience.

The Adams administration has also sought to redirect some of the responsibility for the cuts it is spearheading, blaming the state for failing to provide the city with its fair share of education dollars while covering up the reduced per-pupil funding provided by the city. The mayor pointed to flaws in the school funding allocation system, known as Fair Student Funding Education. His schools chancellor, David Banks, promised to convene a task force within weeks to review the system—the same step taken three years ago by the previous mayor, Bill de Blasio. The 2019 task force disbanded without publishing any recommendations.

The largely hands-off response by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) to the budget cuts has infuriated many educators. The UFT is deeply discredited after the role it played in what has been termed the school year from hell, lining up with the mayor and governor against its own members. The union suppressed opposition to reopening during the pandemic surges, allowed the elimination of nearly all COVID mitigation measures, and reinforced a wall of silence covering up the deaths of children and

other consequences of the failed policies.

“I have no clue what the union is doing regarding [budget cuts],” Michael, an excessed art teacher in Brooklyn, told the WSWS. “At the end of the school year, there was the ‘day of action’ encouraging schools to amplify this issue. Then there was the rally at City Hall. I called the union to ask if they can tell me what they are actively doing to fight these cuts, and the representative I spoke to wasn’t able to give me any more information. They said that they would escalate my query and that I should be hearing back from our district leader. I have yet to get that call.”

“Although I recognize the importance of labor unions, our leadership isn’t doing anything for us. I can’t stand Michael Mulgrew. That bureaucracy is totally bankrupt,” Marcy, an ELA teacher, whose school in Brooklyn is slated to lose \$1.2 million, said. “I’m very underwhelmed by all of the official opposition. On the other hand, on a local level, there have been some inspiring developments coming from the bottom layers upward.”

It is this emergence of opposition from below that concerns the political establishment, prompting not a reversal of austerity but political contortions to cover themselves. Neither political party has any progressive answer to the desperate conditions inside and outside the schools.

More than 100,000 public school students live in unstable or temporary housing, as many families struggle to afford soaring rents, which rose a staggering 39 percent this year. Approximately a quarter of children don’t have enough food to eat, nearly a 50 percent increase over pre-pandemic levels. And contrary to the barrage of misinformation, the pandemic is far from over.

A massive increase in school funding is a prerequisite to begin addressing this social devastation inside and outside the schools. We urge those seeking to carry forward a real struggle against the attacks on school funding to join the New York Educators Rank-and-File Committee.



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