

Protests against cuts at West Virginia University continue as lawmakers allocate tens of millions to war-related research

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On Wednesday, students at West Virginia University in Morgantown rallied outside a meeting of the Faculty Assembly to support a vote of “no confidence” against university president Gordon E. Gee.

The vote was originally called by WVU’s Faculty Senate on August 25th, following last month’s announcement of an “academic transformation plan” by the university administration aimed at addressing a budget deficit of \$45 million, a deficit projected to grow to \$75 million.

The plan aims to eliminate 169 faculty positions (7 percent of faculty) and 31 academic programs (9 percent of majors), affecting departments across the disciplines. At stake is the existence of the entire Department of World Languages, Literature and Linguistics; one of the best ceramics programs in the country; the only mathematics PhD program in the state; as well as other program in geography, music, art, urban planning and more.

The cuts are a frontal assault on the social and cultural rights of the working class in one of the poorest states of the US. In 2020, 17 percent of state residents were living below the federal poverty line of \$26,500 for a family of four. That same year, 29 percent of children reported living in a family that did not get enough to eat or were behind on housing payments.

In a major show of opposition to the cuts, faculty on Wednesday passed the resolution of “no confidence” by a margin of 797-100. While the vote took place inside, students also expressed their opposition to the plan. After the resolution was passed, departing faculty were greeted by overwhelming support from those assembled outside.

Wednesday’s events are only the latest in protests on campus, including a walkout by hundreds of students on August 21 and petitions circulated opposing these cuts

that have gathered tens of thousands of signatures. In an open letter published on Thursday, three faculty members of WVU explained their opposition to these cuts, based on their defense of the democratic right to public education. They warned that, if the cuts went through, WVU “will be left a Potemkin university; a false front; a gutted shell,” and insisted on the critical role of public university education.

The immense opposition to the cuts at WVU has far-reaching political implications. There is a recognition that at stake in this struggle are fundamental social and cultural rights of the working class. Many students and faculty spoke to a WWSW and IYSSE reporting team on what motivated their opposition to these cuts, expressing great concern with the attack on culture, critical thinking, education and the militarization of American society.

Indeed, the attacks at WVU are inseparable from the explosion of US militarism and the preparations for a new world war. While students at WVU are told that there is no money for language, mathematics, music, and other essential elements of culture and education, the Biden administration and the Democratic party are continuing to send billions of dollars to arm Ukraine in a war that was deliberately provoked by US imperialism.

The same day that faculty and students protested the cuts at WVU, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken traveled to Ukraine to reaffirm the US’s involvement in the war “for as long as it takes,” while also announcing the provision of a further \$1 billion dollars from the US for weapons.

In the case of the cuts at WVU, the connection between war abroad and war at home is even more immediate. While the cuts are justified on the basis of a \$45 million budget deficit, both Democratic and Republican lawmakers voted in August to fund a new cybersecurity

center with the exact same amount—\$45 million—at Marshall University, 20 miles away from WVU. The same session rejected sending any funds to WVU to help address its budget deficit. The so called “Marshall project” is praised by Democratic and Republican politicians as a new “East Coast hub” for cybersecurity, which is playing an increasingly prominent role in all wars waged by the US abroad, including the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Moreover, in June, less than two months before the cuts at WVU were announced, Democratic Senator Joe Manchin for West Virginia announced \$3 million from the Department of the Army for a WVU program which, since 2019, has been engaged in the extraction of rare earth elements from acid mine drainage in West Virginia. The aim of the facility is to establish a domestic supply of rare earth minerals and critical minerals, which are central to any modern-day economy.

In announcing the funds, Manchin stated, “I proudly secured this funding to support West Virginia University’s efforts to increase our domestic supply of these minerals, strengthening our national security and economic prosperity. I can’t wait to see how the entire nation benefits, and I will continue to advocate for resources for West Virginia University as they continue to lead the way in energy innovation.” Joe Manchin, who is currently a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee and the Senate Armed Service Committee, is rumored to be considering taking over the presidency of WVU from the 80-year-old Gee who may retire next year.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, the presence of rare earth materials and critical minerals especially in China but also in Ukraine and Russia, are a major economic driving force behind the imperialist powers’ war against Russia in Ukraine, and the war preparations against China.

The provocative and aggressive character of the cuts at WVU can only be understood in this context. While the anger of faculty and students about President Gee, a multi-millionaire who takes home an annual \$800,000, is understandable, neither the vote against him nor his actual removal would signify a solution to the problems. Behind the cuts at WVU is a definite strategy and policy of the entire ruling class.

They are part of a systematic effort to divert all social resources to the war effort and the enrichment of the financial oligarchy. From the standpoint of the ruling class, the cuts at WVU are but an opening shot for a

frontal assault on whatever remains of the cultural and social rights of the working class, all of which were won through bitter struggles in the past. Unless opposed, the destruction of the languages, arts, mathematics and cultural programs at WVU will become the new benchmark for what is to come at universities across the United States and internationally.

Workers and students at WVU can only carry forward their struggle against this attack on their rights based on their own, independent class strategy. They must link up their fight to the struggles of other sections of the working class. In just under one week, the contract of 170,000 autoworkers expires across Canada and the US. The UAW leadership and the Biden administration are feverishly working to negotiate a deal to preempt a strike under conditions in which a former Ford CEO has stated that “electric vehicles will require 30 percent fewer labor hours per car”, signaling preparations by the UAW bureaucracy to push through major job cuts in the years to come.

The enormous opposition to the cuts among students and faculty at WVU and beyond, as well as a growing rebellion of rank-and-file workers in the UAW, at UPS and in other industries, are an indication of a rapidly growing militancy in the American and international working class. The critical question is now that of political program and organization.

In order to fight against imperialist war and the attacks on living standards at home, workers and youth must fight against their root cause, the capitalist system, and take up a fight for a socialism. A central component of this struggle must be the development of the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which works to link up, coordinate and advance the struggles of workers on a national and international level, independent from the union bureaucracies. We urge students, alumni and faculty who want to discuss these questions with us to reach out to the WSWs and the IYSSE today.



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