

“We have a big fight when it comes to public education”

Students, faculty and staff denounce cuts to West Virginia University programs

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On Thursday, the West Virginia University Board of Governors held a public hearing for faculty, staff and students to address the proposed cuts that the University is making to faculty and academic programs. The hearing itself was a formality for the predetermined conclusion which was finalized the following day.

Hundreds of students, faculty, staff and alumni came and protested and voiced their opposition to the cuts. Dozens spoke during the hearing and hundreds more submitted letters and testimony against the cuts.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with students, faculty and staff both before and after the hearing as to why they opposed the cuts and what needed to be done to fight them.

Rena, a student who is studying global supply chains, said,

I see programs that I benefit a lot from, mainly the world language department, not being valued the way I see them to be valuable for my life and my career.

To me this is a worrying move that is indicative of a larger trend in the country.

Learning to write, learning to articulate yourself, learning foreign languages and learning about the broader world—these are exactly the programs that we see at West Virginia University being sidelined, being cut out. It is almost like the foundations are being pulled from below education. I think we are going to see the repercussions of that for years to come.

I’m not behind those closed doors but there’s a sense the drive to keep working people poor and to keep them out of education and to keep them on that lower level may have played a role in this.

We are a land-grant institution. Our budget does come from decisions of this state legislative. There are a lot of poor kids who aren’t going to have access to an affordable liberal arts education, who aren’t going to be able to study a foreign language, to travel abroad, to bring Appalachian culture to the world or bring the world’s culture to Appalachia.

Treasure Barbara-Wycoff, an alum of WVU, a current graduate student and a current full-time staff member, addressed the BOG meeting and afterward spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about what the cuts will mean.

Treasure explained that part of staff member benefits is a tuition waiver to attend graduate school. She pointed out that over 30 percent of students in the Higher Education Administration programs are people working in the University. By cutting these programs, the University is in effect

cutting their pay.

“Staff get the waivers as part of our compensation package for being an employee here. So, it feels like something that we have as part of our employment is being cut.”

Treasure also explained that the promise to allow current students to finish the program, called a “teach-out” by the administration, is “very vague.” She says that without new students, the programs will have only a limited number of classes and times.

“That does not ensure the same robust level of fulfilling classes will be at our disposal. I’m ready to delve into the stuff that I really want to pursue as a higher education professional.”

She also expressed concern that the limited number of classes will mean that, as a full-time worker and part-time student, she will not fit the schedule or be able to get the courses in time to graduate.

As someone who is a full-time staff member, I have a schedule issue. I have to be very mindful of my work schedule. This program was perfect for that. The “teach-out” also doesn’t require that part-time students are factored in. As of right now, I don’t know what that will look like.

As far as I know, they’re not eliminating the tuition waivers, but effectively for me they are. If the program that I’m pursuing is cut, it’s kind of like the tuition waiver dollars that I have already spent and plan to spend are evaporated.

Treasure also sees these cuts are part of broader cuts to education both within West Virginia and throughout the country.

I think that this moment is going to have ripple effects across universities across the country. If we look at the public schools, K through 12, they’re having to combat the “Hope Scholarship” [a program that takes money from public schools and gives it to parents to use for home schooling or private schools] that is taking money from public education. So I think that in this state in particular, we have a big fight when it comes to public education, but that’s public ed from K all the way up there to higher ed.

Zach, a graduate student in the Department of Geology and Geography at West Virginia University, said:

I am here because I believe that these cuts that we are fighting against are entirely unjustified. They violate the fundamental right to education at all levels, especially for the working class and for the people of Appalachia.

My major is not affected. However, I would still argue that there are plenty of downstream effects. The research I do is directly related to the language capacities I was able to develop as an undergraduate. What we're looking at will decimate the World Languages Department. A university thrives on diversity of backgrounds and experience. And we really depend on everything from abstract theoretical math to very concrete social sciences to the liberal arts. And we'd like to say that every person should have the right to improve themselves as a human being and to be able to take whatever courses they find compelling.

When you're seeing what few programs were implemented at the height of the COVID pandemic, that were intended to alleviate the condition for the working class, we're seeing these expire. And we're seeing an increase in childhood poverty in West Virginia, which is out of control. We're seeing slashes to what little healthcare was available to people and the working poor. I think that slashing the university's budget is just part and parcel of the attack of what little there is left of the welfare state.

Dylan, a third-year chemical engineering major, told the WSWS that he was upset by the way the BOG was ignoring the wishes of students and faculty and moving forward with the cuts.

The reason I'm here is the Board of Governors is starting to get tyrannical with its statements and what it's doing. I mean the student body, the faculty, the alumni, the community, they've all expressed how absolutely and staunchly [they are] against what they're trying to impose.

But the Board of Governors consistently does not listen. And it's also consistently hypocritical. And its statements that come out saying that we're misinformed, or we don't know what's happening, while also not being willing to tell us what's happening or give us any insight [or] information.

As a chemical engineering major, I am pretty much never going to be affected by any kind of budget cuts whatsoever, because chemical engineering is just really profitable. But at the end of the day, I'm a student of WVU so anything that happens to WVU happens to me, happens to my friends, happens to everybody.

Everybody should care, you can be a business major, be an arts major, it doesn't matter, you should care. And even people that aren't students here should care. If you're a West Virginia resident, this is like, one of the biggest things we have. This is like one big thing that we can be proud of as a West Virginia resident, and they're stripping us of all of that.

The WSWS asked both Dylan and Zach about the US funding for the military in general and the waging of a proxy war by the US against Russia.

"There's just a never-ending list of countries that we continue to target as the United States," Zach responded. "I think that's directly related to the underlying crisis. The state is propping up the economic system, and in doing so it is slashing social expenditures, propping up these failed businesses and simultaneously, we have a massive expansion of the industrial war-mongering complex.

"I'm very much opposed to how much money the US government

spends on defense in general," added Dylan. "Our budget is still bigger than [the next 10 nations' largest military] budgets put together. I just think that's absolutely horrible. When we have a homeless epidemic, we have drug epidemics, we have so much stuff that can be actually helped if we put that money into the community."

Asked about the need for students to unite their struggle with the growing movement of workers both in the United States and throughout the world, Dylan said,

I absolutely think that's the right idea. Because at the end of the day, no matter how much you ask the people in power to do things or beg and plead and donate money to them to try and get and do things. It's up to them. And they're going to only care about what's in their interest because they want to stay in power. That's what got them there in the first place. But if you go to the working class people, they're going to fight for themselves. They're going to fight for the betterment of the working class. Because I feel like in the working class, there's a greater sense of unity than within the elites. So that absolutely makes sense you need to get to the working class, because they make everything turn in America.

Zach concluded,

I think that there's been a lot of interest in more industrial actions already by the students. With the rapid speed in which we've been responding to everything developing here, we haven't really been able to do as many solidarity actions as I think many students would like. However, we've openly discussed things like Starbucks workers and the United Auto Workers. We've been in touch with mineworkers here in West Virginia. Even the aesthetic of this movement harkens back to the miner's battle of Blair Mountain.

I would say, any kind of successful student struggle should embed itself with the working class with class struggle as front and center. I think that the downfall of a lot of the new left movements of the late '60s was because they were seemingly very distant from the reality of working class people.



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