

“Devastating”: The New School students denounce major attacks on faculty and academic programs

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Administration at the New School for Social Research (NSSR) in New York City has launched a sweeping assault on its faculty and academic programs, targeting 40 percent of full-time professors for elimination under the guise of a “voluntary separation program.” In early December, 169 full-time faculty received letters offering buyouts and early retirement and giving them barely two weeks, until December 15, to respond.

The admin’s letter threatened “involuntary reduction” if faculty didn’t voluntarily accept termination, adding, “the severance package under an involuntary program would not be as substantial as the package offered through the voluntary option.” The voluntary severance package includes a payout of six months’ salary.

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP), of which NSSR faculty are organized under, has described this as the “largest attempted firing of faculty currently taking place in the nation.”

In addition, nearly all doctoral admissions for the 2026–27 academic year have been “paused,” and several undergraduate majors have been slated for elimination.

The administration is justifying these “necessary” attacks with reference to a \$48 million budget deficit. In a November email announcing the need for extreme austerity measures, President Joel Towers told the NSSR community that “every area of the university will need to prepare for changes.” Alternative economic proposals, without mass layoffs, submitted by faculty members and even multi-million dollar offers of donations to continue PhD programs, have reportedly been denied by Towers, who said this would only “kick the can down the road.”

Widespread opposition among students, faculty, and staff has erupted and a rally of several hundred was held last week before the end of semester. Many community members insist that the cuts strike at the very foundations of the New School as a haven for critical social research and thought. What was once the “University in Exile” for scholars fleeing fascism and political persecution in 1930s Europe is now a university where the well-paid administrators are exiling their own faculty out of their jobs.

Austerity measures at the NSSR aren’t new, however. In 2020, the university laid off 122 administrative staff, eliminating 13 percent of these workers with just one week’s notice, even as it maintained a president’s salary in excess of \$1 million and a \$15

million townhouse for the executive residence. In 2022, 1,700 part-time faculty—who made up nearly 87 percent of the instructional staff but only around 8 percent of the budget—went on strike after years without raises, demanding living wages, health coverage and job security.

What is posed at The New School is a political fight in defense of academic freedom and higher education as a whole, not simply a local campus dispute. The same capitalist crisis that drives the Trump administration’s dismantling of the Department of Education, the ideological takeover of universities and the destruction of academic freedom is behind the demolition of jobs, programs, and conditions at institutions like the New School. To oppose these attacks, NSSR students and workers must link their struggle with educators, students and workers across New York, the United States, and internationally in a unified fight against the capitalist system itself.

The WSWS interviewed students at the New School outside the University Center on Wednesday about these issues.

A masters student in Philosophy, who wanted to remain anonymous, said, “I don’t know if my advisor will be here next year. If he isn’t here, I don’t know if the other professor I could work with will be here. I really have no idea. I have spent a lot of time and money at this institution and am very close to everyone here and it’s really devastating. It is not just affecting me academically, but personally. People who have become my close friends and mentors do not know what their next step will be. My very close friends who are PhD students don’t know if they are going to have to leave to be with their PhD advisor, move across the country? It’s crazy.

“I know that the faculty supports us in any way they can. Many of my professors were at the rally were at our town hall where Provost Kessler came and where we asked him questions that straight away he refused to answer. He refused to face them. He was rolling his eyes at us.

“We will continue to voice our concerns, continue to talk to each other. Not just accept this, right? Because they are trying to tell us, ‘Oh no, don’t worry, it’s going to be reversed, once the changes are reversed, once we get enough money.’ I think that we really need to keep doing and what we are doing; not accept this ambiguity.”

Asked about the broader attacks by Trump, she responded, “I

think we need to get together and rally against this and connect it all back to education. Trump's attacks are about getting control of education. Kessler and [New School President] Towers are using as an excuse that they are not actually funded by Trump. But the fact is they are scared and trying to bow down in front of him [Trump], just as a precaution."

Two BA/BFA students also spoke out on the faculty cuts. Orion told the WSWS, "They're cutting my major. They got rid of the entire anthropology department. They tell you you can still take classes but it's not going to be as good because they fired all the teachers. They're also isolating PhD students because they're going to get rid of their programs that they're under and the teachers that are mentoring them. What are we doing guys?"

"They're saying we're here for the new wave thinkers, the individuals, and then they're like, 'Oh well, I don't think this is very important anymore.' Getting rid of programs, it's telling what they aren't valuing."

Wynn added, "It's disappointing as a school. The admin's salaries are unreasonably crazy compared to everyone else. It's corrupt. It's against everything that the New School stands for. They're directly inhibiting what they claim to stand for as an administration. ...I think it's important for all of us to protest. It's our school, we should have a say. If I knew of a protest that students could be involved in, I would be a part of it."

Asked about how to oppose these attacks, Orion said, "I'm a big believer in strikes. They're hard because it takes away jobs and money and things people need. So not everyone can always participate, but I think strikes hit at the root of what you have to take away. The things that they care about in the end, when they're not listening, the only thing they care about is money. So, striking and preventing them from making money is the only thing they'll listen to sometimes."

On what message they'd like to send to the faculty, Wynn replied, "What I'd say is thank you because the faculty at the school make the school what it is. People come here for the teachers. I found that all the professors I've had have been incredibly supportive, and I know that everyone has that experience. They make the school, so they deserve to have better resources and get treated better. And we'll fight for them."

A third-year fashion student at Parsons told the WSWS, "I think the handling of the situation is atrocious. I'm really sorry to see what's happening to The New School. I think it has a history of both political thought, economic thought and progressivism. It's just horrible to see die in this way."

A fifth-year BA/BFA student said, "It's ridiculous. First and foremost, it's just sad for these people who have committed their lives to this institution and educating young people about things they care about. Especially a place like this, a research school that's focused on how society is structuring in a time where humanities are being devalued. Schools like this should stand up and increase the value. It's very strange. It's like the millionth terrible thing the school has done in my time here and as a student, it feels super stressful and like the next semester is so unclear, let alone the future of the school we all really care about."

"I hope the professors feel how much student support we're sending their way, and we're ready to do whatever they want and

need us to do."

Asked if she would support a broader movement of students uniting with the working class against layoffs and austerity, she replied, "I'm all for it. I think that we've seen student movements have to happen before in history, and I think this might be a time where that happens again. When we see universities liquidating intellectuals, we know what's going on, and it's not a good thing."

A fashion design student in his first semester decried the cuts to the faculty. "I definitely think it's crazy. I heard the head of the school was getting a major pay increase and they were taking Lang and COPA [College of Performing Arts] and turning them into Parsons, like merging them for monetary reasons, not for good reasons."

"For me, my tuition is kind of high because I pay out-of-state tuition. I think that a lot of schools, especially like ours, could have lower costs in all areas because a lot of the people running it could take pay cuts, stop putting so much money in their pockets, or get out of their nice, fancy mansions or their luxury apartments, and try to actually make it a school worth going to, rather than only a school for people who can afford it."

"Maybe I have a glass half empty view, but unless there is true change, with young people having more influence of power, it is just going to get worse until it reaches a bubbling point. Young people have to get up and we're not there yet. We're the ones who are starting to make waves; we should have something that is ours, where we can make an actual difference."

"People have to get mad enough. I think you can fight it with more knowledge, learning the information surrounding it. But in any revolution it has been people getting tired enough to actually do something. While marches and walks are effective in some ways—they bring visibility—I don't think they can get further than that. I'm all for protests but it's got to be everyone getting behind it, like 'I'll be willing to miss classes and do it' and understanding the point of what they are doing."



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