

School budget proposal threatens 200 job cuts in Paterson, New Jersey

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On May 4, the school board of Paterson, New Jersey, will vote on a proposed budget for the coming school year that would cut jobs. The board's professed goal is to preserve classroom instruction while managing rising costs.

The board is using technocratic language to camouflage its attack on public education in this poverty-stricken, working class city. Paterson's schools rely heavily on state aid, but annual increases in this aid are capped at 6 percent. This year's increase will mostly go to charter schools and not to public schools.

In February, Business Administrator June Gray warned that Paterson faced a "fiscal cliff," largely because of the expiration of COVID-era funding and other nonrecurring revenue sources. In late March, the Board of Education introduced a budget of \$851.9 million.

During the meeting, Superintendent Dr. Laurie Newell spoke of "fiscal responsibility" and "efficiencies." Board members contrasted a low increase in city revenue with the rising costs of employee benefits, transportation, special education and charter schools. These are expenses that the district cannot easily control.

Like last year's budget, the current budget would increase the school tax by 8 percent. The capital outlay would drop sharply from \$9.2 million to \$876,346. This 90 percent cut would mean delayed repairs to Paterson's school buildings, many of which are between 90 and 120 years old, and increased risk of hazards like leaks and mold.

The board estimates that it will send \$188.1 million to charter schools, which is an increase of \$27.5 million over last year. Thus, charter schools will absorb most of the \$37 million in additional state aid that Paterson is receiving. In practice, this means austerity for public

schools, which have fixed costs and higher overhead than charter schools.

If the budget is rejected or further cuts are necessary, then as many as 200 school jobs could be cut, according to the board.

Paterson is New Jersey's third most populous city. Nearly 65 percent of the city's population is Hispanic, and 44.6 percent are immigrants. Paterson also has one of the highest proportions of Muslims of any US city.

In the early 1790s, Paterson became a center for industrial manufacturing powered by the Great Falls, a 77-foot waterfall on the Passaic River. In 1792 the Great Falls was chosen by Alexander Hamilton as the cornerstone for America's first planned industrial city. Using a pioneering water raceway system, it powered industries like textiles, locomotives and silk.

It was the site of one of the most significant mass strikes in US history, the Paterson Silk Strike of 1913. It was led by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and important figures of the American labor movement such as Bill Haywood, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Carlo Tresca helped organize the diverse workforce, which included Italian, Jewish, Polish and Irish immigrants.

But after World War II, economic changes brought a long process of deindustrialization to the city. Today, Paterson is a city of small businesses and low wages. Its poverty rate is 21.2 percent. Such levels of social misery are incompatible with promoting academic achievement and providing young people with opportunities to flourish.

The poor conditions in Paterson's public schools have contributed to increasing enrollment in charter schools. In consequence, charter schools have been receiving even more funds, thus depriving public schools of resources. But charter schools are not

associated with decisively better academic outcomes. Paterson's charter schools have modestly higher rates of English and math proficiency but still perform far below state averages. Two of them rank in the bottom 50 percent statewide.

Moreover, teachers at charter schools face generally worse conditions than those at public schools. They tend to have longer working hours, larger workloads, more non-instructional responsibilities, more turnover and more burnout. Charter schools also rely on teachers with less experience. They tend to be nonunion, and their educators enjoy fewer labor protections.

Under a contested plan that Newell announced in January, four of Paterson's elementary schools will be closed in June. The closures will disrupt the academic and social lives of about 1,000 students, who will be reassigned to other schools. The likely results will include overcrowded classrooms and a further increase in the enrollment of students in charter schools.

The proposed budget for Paterson's schools follows the first budget of New Jersey Governor Mikie Sherrill, a CIA Democrat. In her address to the state legislature, Sherrill noted that her "fiscally responsible" budget contained \$2.6 billion in "tough, necessary cuts." In its budget materials, her administration warned that "more money alone cannot solve long-term fiscal challenges facing school districts." Perhaps this rationale is intended to justify the aid reductions that 167 of the state's 574 school districts face.

Paterson remains millions of dollars below what the state's own formula says it needs for a "thorough and efficient" education. The 6 percent cap on annual increases in state aid prevents the district from ever catching up to that adequacy target. In addition, when Paterson's health insurance and transportation costs spike because of inflation, the 6 percent cap results in a net loss of purchasing power.

Neither Sherrill, a former Navy officer, nor her fellow Democrats insist on fiscal responsibility when it comes to funding for the Pentagon. The Democrats joined hands with the Republicans to provide the nearly \$1 trillion that President Trump is using, without congressional approval, to wage an illegal war of aggression against Iran.

The aim of this bloodshed is to exert US dominance over the Middle East and seize natural resources. This war serves as preparation for a potentially catastrophic

showdown with China, the main economic rival of the US. To fund these wars of conquest, the ruling class demands that budgets for education and social programs be sacrificed. As a US Representative from New Jersey, Sherrill consistently supported this agenda.

The Paterson Board of Education presents its proposed budget as a response to fiscal or technical problems. In fact, the budget reflects a political decision to shortchange public education in a city that has long been starved of resources.

The wealth that could eliminate Paterson's poverty and replace its crumbling schools is being hoarded by New Jersey's billionaires. These figures include hedge fund manager John Overdeck, who has a net worth of \$8 billion, and businessman Peter Kellogg, who has a net worth of \$5.5 billion. Providing the best education for Paterson's children and ensuring that they have opportunities to develop themselves and find satisfying jobs requires the expropriation of this wealth by the working class.



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