

Layoff Notices Sent to Thousands of US Teachers

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Hundreds of thousands of public school teachers across the United States are facing possible layoffs this coming academic year.

Confronting massive budget deficits, school districts throughout the country have been sending out notices (“pink slips”) to employees this spring, warning them that they are unlikely to have a job in the fall. The bloodletting is worst in California, Illinois, New York, Michigan, and New Jersey, but nearly every region in the country is affected.

Pink slips were sent out to 22,000 teachers in California, 17,000 in Illinois, and 15,000 in New York. The jobs of 8,000 school employees in Michigan, 6,000 in New Jersey, and 5,000 in Oklahoma may also be axed.

These numbers are expected to increase in coming months. Officials in Illinois report that as many as 20,000 educators could lose their jobs in the state. In California, an additional 4,000 people may be put on notice.

US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated earlier this week that between 100,000 to 300,000 public education positions in the US are in danger. A study conducted by the American Association of School Administrators found that ninety percent of the nation’s school superintendents plan to cut jobs in the fall. This represents an increase of about 30 percent over the previous year.

The mass layoffs have the Obama administration’s stamp of approval.

On March 1, Obama publicly supported the firing of the entire faculty and staff at Central Falls High School in Rhode Island. He hailed the action as an example of what should be done at schools around the country in order to hold educators “accountable” for so-called “poor performance.” In doing so, Obama gave a green light to a nationwide attack on teachers.

The Obama administration has also tied meager federal funds to the implementation of such measures, as well as the expansion of charter schools. The crisis facing school districts in the coming school year is exacerbated by the fact that most states have used up whatever portion of the \$100 billion in federal stimulus money they received from Washington in 2009.

Democratic Senator Tom Harkin has proposed a paltry \$23 billion education bailout. The allocation of such a sum, which is only \$6 billion more than the cuts made to public education in California in the past two years alone, would be inadequate to rescue the public school system in the US.

In any case, the Iowa congressman's proposed legislation is largely for show. As the *New York Times* observed in an April 21 article, "Senior Democratic aides said that because Mr. Harkin's would add to the deficit, it was unlikely to pass."

Major metropolitan areas are being particularly hard hit by teacher layoffs. Detroit has warned 2,000 educators—40 percent of its total teaching staff—they might be out of a job come September. News of the pink slips follows an announcement that the city plans to permanently close 41 schools in June and another 13 within the next two years.

In Los Angeles, which has gutted its education budget by \$1 billion in the past year alone, 5,200 school employees received pink slips last month. Since then, two thousand positions have purportedly been saved in a deal worked out with the unions that offsets job cuts with a reduction in the school year by five days, and a corresponding reduction in pay. However, with the city facing a further \$600 million in education cuts this coming year, more job cuts are possible.

Chicago's public school system intends to lay off 3,200 teachers and an additional 880 school employees. In nearby Elgin, Illinois, which is the second largest school district in the state, 1,079 employees received pink slips.

The same devastating scenario is taking place in large and small communities around the country. The public school system in Cleveland, Ohio, announced 775 layoffs, including 650 teachers. In Flint, Michigan, where there is a \$15-20 million shortfall in the education budget, 261 teachers will lose their jobs in June. In the Washington, DC, area, Prince George's County plans to eliminate 800 positions. In Flagstaff, Arizona, 500 employees had been sent pink slips—including administrators, every counselor and librarian, as well as all art, music, and physical education teachers.

The list goes on and on. All of this refutes official claims of an economic recovery. Tax revenues, which are used by states to finance public education, continue to stagnate or decline.

Mass layoffs are only one aspect of the crisis. A survey conducted by the American Association of School Administrators found that 62 percent of the nation's school districts intend to increase class sizes, 34 percent are considering the elimination of summer school, and 13 percent—up from 2 percent last year—may impose a four-day school week. In addition, school buildings are being shuttered, bus service reduced or cancelled, and educational and extracurricular programs ended.

As big business politicians use the fiscal catastrophe in states to dismantle public education, there is a coordinated attempt, aided by the trade unions, to pit different sections of the working class against each another to prevent a unified opposition.

In California, Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger is backing legislation that would allow teacher layoffs regardless of seniority. Schwarzenegger, who oversaw the implementation of \$17 billion in public education cuts, is attempting to posture as a defender of hardworking junior teachers. They are usually the first to get sacked when layoffs occur. He is joined by numerous Democrats, including Los Angeles State Senator Gloria Romero, chair of the Senate Education Committee.

The aim of the bill in the California Legislature is not to protect the state's best teachers, but

rather to save millions of dollars by targeting the jobs of better-paid, more senior teachers and replacing them with younger, lower paid employees. The legislation is designed to divert widespread popular anger over mass layoffs into hostility towards supposedly “burnt out” older teachers, and to sow divisions among teachers themselves. The unions in California, which are opposing the legislation, contribute to these divisions by refusing to wage a defense of the jobs of *all* teachers, regardless of seniority.

In areas across the country, there are efforts to pass laws that would increase sales and other taxes in order to shore up state revenues. At a rally in Illinois on Wednesday, at which thousands demonstrated in opposition to education cuts, the main demand advanced by the public employee unions was to raise the state income tax from 3 to 4 percent. Such a measure would force working people who are losing their jobs and homes to pay for the economic crisis, while having no significant impact on the wealth of the rich.

Teachers unions throughout the country have accepted the premise that cuts are necessary. Their primary aim has been to demand that they be given a seat at the table in determining how cuts will be implemented.

At times the unions advocate wage reductions or freezes in exchange for jobs, as was done recently in Los Angeles. These concessions will, however, fail to resolve the fiscal crises facing school districts, and the government will come back for more. The unions will then work to convince their membership to make more sacrifices. By proving their usefulness in imposing the assault on public education, the union bureaucracy seeks to ensure that no matter how many jobs are lost, its positions will remain.

The mass layoff of teachers and school employees underscores the urgent necessity for workers to build rank-and-file organizations independent of the unions. The attack on teachers is part of the attack on public education as a whole, and a powerful appeal should be made to the entire working class to wage a common struggle. Teachers should prepare for a nationwide strike to oppose all layoffs, wage and benefit cuts, school closings, and cuts in programs.

Any opposition immediately confronts the fact that teachers face a coordinated campaign by the entire corporate-controlled political establishment. While millions of teachers voted for Obama in the hopes that he would change the policies of the Bush administration, they are now discovering that the Democratic president is their most bitter enemy.

The policies of Obama correspond to the interests of the financial elite that he represents. After handing over trillions of dollars to Wall Street, the government is now insisting that there is “no money” for education and other social programs. Wall Street investors, whose relationship to the rest of society is essentially parasitic, are pulling in record pay, while teachers, who perform one of the most important functions, are being forced to sacrifice.

A defense of public education therefore requires a transformation of the structure of American and world society. Capitalism—a society dedicated to the principle of private profit and individual wealth of a tiny layer—must be replaced with socialism—the democratic and rational control of production in the interest of social need.

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