

Tens of thousands rally against New Jersey budget cuts

By a WSWWS reporting team
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Over 30,000 teachers, public workers, retirees and community activists protested on Saturday in Trenton, New Jersey's state capital, against Governor Chris Christie's massive budget cuts.

The rally had been called by a coalition of community organizations and trade unions, including the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) and the Communications Workers of America (CWA).

Under Christie's new budget plan—which calls for the elimination of nearly \$1 billion in state aid to schools—thousands of teachers statewide will lose their jobs and sports and arts programs will be cut.

The new budget will cut after-school programs, adult education programs and higher education budgets as well as assistance to free lunch programs for poor children, and a special rent rebate for elderly and disabled tenants.

Christie has also proposed legislation that will attack other public employees. His plan includes the elimination of seniority protection for public employees, an increase in employee contributions to health care and pensions, and raising the retirement age from 62 to 65 years. The state legislature will vote on the cuts by June 30.

The austerity program in New Jersey is a part of a bipartisan effort to make the working class pay for the economic crisis. Nationwide, state budgets have suffered from the largest drop in revenue on record, largely due to the mass unemployment created by the recession. The Obama administration has refused to significantly reduce the total \$375 billion collective budget deficit of the states.

The thousands that attended the rally—one of the largest in the capital's history—were furious at Christie not only for his repeated attacks on public education and social programs, but especially because on Thursday he had vetoed a measure that would have modestly increased taxes on the state's 16,000 people with incomes of \$1 million or more. (New Jersey has a population of almost 9 million.) Homemade signs could be seen everywhere calling for increased taxation of the rich.

The measure itself, however, was calculated to appease the widespread anger at the state's wealthy. It was sponsored by the Democrats in the State Assembly, and if there had been any chance of its passing, they would not have proposed it. Democrats do not have the two-thirds majority required to override a veto. Even if the tax had been passed, it would have raised only about \$640 million in revenue.

Far from offering a plan of action to resist Christie, the union leaders and others who spoke at the Trenton rally sought to divert the anger of the demonstrators into support for the Democratic Party.

Barbara Keshishian, president of the NJEA, told the rally, "If legislators remain silent, then they will share the blame.... This rally is only the beginning. We will keep fighting for what we worked so hard to build. We will stand up for what we've earned. We will fight for our rights. We will fight for the future of this state. We will fight until this governor and the legislature do the right thing."

Chris Shelton, a vice president of the Communications Workers of America, told the protesters, "We are here to say to the governor and legislature: 'We are fed up, and we are not going to take it anymore!'"

This is the kind of fake "populism" that President Obama has also used on a few occasions lately, in the face of the growing anger of workers over unemployment, budget cuts and bailouts and growing bonuses for the bankers. It has the same content and aim coming from the union officials as from the president—to allow workers to blow off steam while keeping them tied to the parties of big business.

The real work of the union leadership goes on away from the public stage. NJEA leaders are already collaborating on the state's application for Race to the Top funds, one of the instruments by which the ruling elite seeks to undermine public education. Local unions continue to surrender teachers' rights and allow layoffs to go through.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed nearly 4,000 copies of a leaflet that called for the formation of action committees to carry out strikes and workplace occupations, for a break with the Democrats and Republicans, and for socialist polices, including the nationalization of the banks and big corporations.

This last demand evoked an especially favorable response from many teachers and other workers, whose deeply felt hostility to the Wall Street moguls was entirely different from the phony words of the bureaucrats on the stage.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed teachers, students and workers who attended the rally.

Karitikeya Sapoo, a doctoral student at Rutgers studying cultural anthropology, told the WSWWS, "Governor Christie cut the budget for Rutgers by about 15 percent for this coming fiscal year. The

sad part is the administration invited him to commencement and awarded him an honorary degree. The students booed him.

“They are blatantly rolling back all kinds of services, and they are doing it with impunity. The corporate lobbyists, especially in finance, have taken over the government. There is a global crisis of accumulation, and there is a disconnect between production and the financial sector. We are all part of a struggle, and we should recognize it.”

Stan Bryant is a state worker with 10 years at the Department of Children and Families (DCF). He said, “There are going to be a quite a few layoffs at DCF in addition to more furloughs. Right now, we are being furloughed for 10 days. Christie is talking about forcing us to take 26 days of furlough. This would be about a 10 percent cut in wages. The 10-day furlough reduces our salaries by almost half of that.

“We are also worried about more attacks when the lawsuit won by a child advocacy group to get improved services ends in 2011. We are under a court mandate until about a year from now. There are about two or three thousand DCF workers, and we are in CWA 1037. We are hoping that we will strike. They don’t pay any attention to us. We have to wage a struggle.

“I would consider looking into the possibility of a workers’ party. I think the banks should pay for the crisis and for social services. They created the crisis. There are hundreds of thousands of state workers in New Jersey. They have tried the furloughs with other state workers. The furloughs create more pressure on us at work because you have more work to do with workers out all the time.

“They are trying to raise our retirement age from 60 to 65. This is bad. You have already worked 25 years. Why should you have to work more, especially when so many people are out of work? Christie is cutting payments into the pension fund by some \$3 billion this year. This is when the pension system is already underfunded, as I understand.”

Joe Ulicki, a supervisor at St. Lucy’s Homeless Shelter in Jersey City, pointed out, “What is happening is that Christie is proposing to eliminate general assistance for single men and women in New Jersey. This provides people with \$140 in income a month. With this \$140 our residents need to pay for transportation to look for work, to take care of necessities like getting a haircut and buying clothes or medical supplies like aspirin. Without this, they would have to live with no income at all.

“The wages people make even if they find a minimum wage job are so low that with job insecurity, people become homeless because they cannot keep up with their rent. They are constantly being laid off and have to come back to St. Lucy’s to start over again. They need to get clothes, haircuts, medicine to get prepared to look for a job. They cannot do this with food stamps. Christie feels like he can make these cuts because the unemployed on welfare are some of the most vulnerable people in our society.”

Anthony Giusto, a special education and language teacher at the Passaic County Technical Institute, told the WSWS, “All the first year teachers have been given notice that they won’t be hired back. Many others at the lower levels of seniority at the school have also received notices. The totals are about a couple of hundred out of 500 teachers at the school that face being laid off.

This will have a terrible effect on the teachers being laid off. My fiancée is a teacher in Paterson and she has been sent a layoff notice along with more than 800 Paterson teachers. This is going back six years in seniority.

“These cuts are not only having a terrible effect on the teachers who are being laid off, but it will have a serious effect on education by raising class sizes. Paterson is a state-run district. Here the state can impose more cuts more easily. In Paterson, they imposed a 1.5 percent health benefit cut. The Paterson teachers were forced to take a pay freeze.

“Newark and 21 other school districts in New Jersey are run by the state instead of by local school boards. The state took them over in the early and mid 1990s. Teachers haven’t lost collective bargaining entirely in these districts, but it is greatly curtailed. The state is making the biggest cuts in these districts, which are the major urban districts in the state.

“They are imposing freeze contracts on teachers, and these districts are taking the hardest hits. There is a conscious policy by both parties to privatize education in New Jersey. Private companies are coming in to take over just like Edison did in Philadelphia. Obama is dangling funds for his ‘Race to the Top’ program to do the same thing.”

Branden Rippey has been a teacher in Newark for 12 years. He teaches history at Science Park High School and told the WSWS, “I am at the demonstration because 11 teachers in my building are being laid off. There are 80 teachers at Science Park High School, which is the magnet school in Newark and like Bronx Science High School in New York. It is also because class sizes will be increased next year, and next year students won’t have elective courses like sociology, which I teach, because there will only be enough teachers to teach the core courses.

“The ruling elite today doesn’t want students to be educated. For instance, if they don’t teach history students won’t have any idea about the history of the workers’ movement. I teach labor history, and students are always surprised to hear about the 1919 Seattle strike where workers took over the city for about a week.

“About 2,000 students in Newark walked out of classes on April 27 and marched to city hall because of the budget cuts. In one of the biggest contingents in the city, about 500 walked out of our school in support of teachers and education. I was proud of them.

“I think it was very important there was a statewide walkout of students. This shows that the students are not jaded by the system. The unions have become way too bureaucratic, especially the union in Newark. I’m a building rep in the union, but the NTU has done nothing there. We definitely need to break with the Democratic Party as well as the Republicans. I’ve also left the Green Party. I am in favor of a mass socialist party.”

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