

Philadelphia schools to lay off nearly 4,000 teachers

By Nick Barrickman
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On Friday, the superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), William Hite, Jr., announced plans to lay off nearly 4,000 school workers in the coming months. The destruction of jobs comes as part of a “doomsday” austerity budget in the public school system that was passed several weeks ago by the School Reform Commission (SRC), which is appointed by the state and the city to oversee its public schools.

The budget, passed in May, would see 3,783 educators and staff laid off in the District in the coming months. The budget itself contains a \$304 million deficit, part of a continuing \$1.1 billion debt the school district is facing. Without the needed funds, schools would be required to go without many essentials, including staff, textbooks, and even notebook paper in some cases. Among the cuts to school staff will be an estimated 300 secretaries, 283 guidance counselors, 769 support service assistants, 676 teachers, and more than 1,200 noon-time aides (see “School district of Philadelphia passes ‘doomsday’ austerity budget”).

Speaking on the budget as a whole, Democratic city mayor Michael Nutter stated that the “quality of education in Philadelphia will plummet and we will all suffer as a result: poverty, unemployment, crime, lost wages and lack of personal opportunity.” For his part, Hite added that he was “profoundly upset about having to take these actions” but ultimately, the “School District of Philadelphia must live within its means.”

Hite, the mayor and members of the SRC have devised schemes to attempt to close the yawning school deficit, including taking further loans at the state level as well as inducing city workers to give up over \$100 million in concessions to fill the gap. Nutter has also devised reactionary plans to hike “sin” taxes on tobacco and alcohol 10 to 15 percent. Absolutely decried in all circumstances have been attempts to raise

taxes on larger businesses within the city.

Along with the layoffs, other generalized cuts in public education are being wielded. In March, Hite finalized a plan to close more than two-dozen public schools in the city in the coming year. Under a proposal that was taken up last year by the district, nearly 40 additional schools will be shuttered in subsequent years.

The closure of schools will see a further loss of jobs in education and the increased proliferation of for-profit charter schools. It is projected that by 2017, as high as 40 percent of the district’s student population will be enrolled in such facilities.

In February, the school district proposed a new contract for the city’s remaining educators. Included in the agreement would be an immediate pay cut of 13 percent. Teachers will see their average yearly pay cut from \$45,000 to \$39,000. This would be compounded by a pay freeze until 2017, leaving teachers vulnerable to cost-of-living increases in the future. Also included are increased out-of-pocket fees for health coverage. Recent contracts signed between the city and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), the largest union representing educators, have already undermined health care coverage.

Remaining teachers would also see classroom sizes grow exponentially, while support staff decreases.

In mid-May, Superintendent Hite expressed an interest in doing away with teacher seniority as a means of luring state funding from legislators in order to close the budget gap. Referring to seniority rules as a “cesspool,” Hite said the district should be rewarding “the performance of individuals as it relates to outcomes for students vs. how long they’ve been in the position.”

This philosophy hasn’t been applied to Hite, who

receives a \$300,000 yearly salary to carry out a wrecking job on public education in the city of Philadelphia. The salary represents a \$50,000 increase from his previous role as superintendent of Prince George's County Schools in suburban Washington, D.C., where he gained notoriety for laying off teachers under the same pretenses of "balancing the budget."

In an attempt to obscure the essential class nature of the budget, PFT president Jerry Jordan in a public address called the job eliminations an "immoral act." Despite the appeals to morality, Jordan offered little by way of means to defend public education, rather calling on "Philadelphia taxpayers" to join him in a protest stunt outside the governor's office later this month. Jordan has often complained of the "unfair" nature of the budget cuts, obscuring the essential role his union had in forcing past concessions on its membership, including under his tenure.

The efforts to eliminate teacher's protections are of a piece with the drive to transform public education as a whole into a for-profit enterprise, carried out on a bipartisan basis by both Democrats and Republicans, as is enshrined in the Obama administration's "Race to the Top." Under this program, impoverished schools are forced to compete among themselves through the implementation of standardized tests and merit pay for teachers. Should districts fall behind on grades or fail to implement attacks on educators, schools are either shut down or turned over to for-profit charters.

The Obama administration has presided over a general attack on public education throughout his presidency, with more than 300,000 teacher layoffs and 4,000 schools closed since Obama took office. Through his administration, the ruling class is attempting to impose the burden of the 2008 financial crisis onto the backs of workers through the elimination of basic social programs, including health care, unemployment benefits, and education.

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