

Chicago State University threatens to lay off entire staff amidst state budget impasse

By Alexander Fangmann
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On Friday, February 26, Chicago State University (CSU)—one of 12 public universities in Illinois—issued notice of potential layoffs to all faculty, staff, and administrators citing a financial emergency created by a lack of state funding. Like all public universities and community colleges, CSU has received no financial support from the state since the beginning of the fiscal year on July 1, as both Democrats and Republicans have decided to target public higher education for a drastic downsizing while they continue to negotiate over how best to carry out wider austerity measures on behalf of the financial elite.

CSU had moved earlier in February to declare a state of “financial exigency,” defined by the American Association of University Professors as an “imminent financial crisis, which threatens the survival of the institution as a whole.” Following this, the university named a committee of administrators who would have broad authority to “review and decide all employment actions, including layoffs, reductions in compensation, terminations and significant position modifications.”

Likely outcomes include the shutdown of academic programs and layoff of faculty, including those with tenure. Just last week, CSU announced it would eliminate spring break and end the semester early in order to avoid running out of money in March, as officials had previously warned.

While the CSU administration does not expect the school to close down entirely and eliminate all positions, the university will likely implement massive cuts and layoffs, which will be announced in 60 days, following the end of the academic semester. Downplaying closure as a “worst-case scenario,” President Thomas Calhoun Jr., said “we will remain open, even if it’s in a pared-down and different configuration.”

Such a “paring down” is almost certain to mean the elimination of programs with lower enrollment, reducing the academic options for students at the school, and may force many to change their area of study or transfer to a different institution. Already, 10 percent of total staff has been laid off since the beginning of the year.

The situation facing CSU, located on Chicago’s South Side, is the most acute expression of the crisis playing out in higher education throughout the state. Serving a student population of over 4,500—drawn overwhelmingly from working class and minority students in the Chicago area—the school relies on state funding for approximately 30 percent of its budget, around \$36 million per year, and has little in the way of financial reserves.

It is quite possible that state universities and colleges will receive zero funding for the present fiscal year. Even after that, CSU and other institutions are in line for further cuts. Having received \$1.95 billion in appropriations in 2015, billionaire Republican Governor Bruce Rauner’s fiscal year 2017 budget for higher education proposed to lay out only \$1.75 billion, which would represent a greater than 10 percent reduction.

Most other universities and community colleges have also announced impending layoffs and cuts, including Western Illinois University (WIU), which announced on February 26 that it plans to cut \$20 million in spending over the next two fiscal years. Having already cut spending by \$5 million for the current year, WIU plans to reduce contracts for administrators from 12 to 11 or 10 months, eliminate 100 faculty and staff, introduce a hiring freeze, and reduce hours. WIU had already eliminated 30 faculty members in January.

A union representative at John A. Logan College in

downstate Carterville confirmed that 40 to 60 workers could be laid off, while the president of Parkland College said that nine would be let go, the first time the college has reduced staff in 25 years. Parkland will have reduced its full-time staff from 492 to under 445 by the end of the year. Parkland also approved a tuition increase of 11.7 percent, and many other community colleges are planning to raise tuition as well in order to meet the fiscal crisis.

All institutions of higher education have been hit by the lack of funding, including private ones, as Monetary Award Program (MAP) grants given to low-income students have also not been paid. Those schools with stronger reserves and endowments, such as DePaul and the University of Illinois, have indicated they will cover the cost of those awards. Schools with more tenuous finances, such as Saint Xavier University, Dominican University, and many community colleges, which have large numbers of MAP grant-eligible students, have stated they will be unable to cover the costs and will be forced to pass them along to the students.

Students throughout the state, and particularly those at CSU, have taken to protesting the attacks on public education. So far, however, the unions and the Democratic Party have attempted to ensure that all protests stay aimed at pressuring state officials to fund colleges and universities. At one such protest on Saturday on the CSU campus, organized by the Democratic Party's State Assembly Black Caucus, students nevertheless expressed sentiments that go far beyond the politics promoted by the Democratic Party. According to a report in DNAinfo, one student speaker at the event said, "I didn't know my education was a privilege. I thought it was a right."

There is a worry among layers of the ruling class that the working class and youth, including students, are moving to the left in response to the ongoing social crisis and the austerity policies put forward by Democrats no less than the Republicans. The political role of the presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders is to try to keep this growing social opposition within the Democratic Party. For that reason, Sanders made sure to hold a rally of several thousand people on February 25 on the CSU campus in order to tap into this disaffection.

After leading decades of attacks on higher education,

in which state spending has gone from \$3.6 billion in 1978, adjusted for inflation, to \$2.21 billion in 2014, the Democratic Party is attempting to use the crisis created by the budget impasse in order to burnish its credentials among working people. The unions and Democrats have heaped the blame for the budget impasse on Rauner's intransigent insistence on the passing of anti-working class measures before he will sign off on a budget. The reality is, however, that the Democrats essentially welcomed Rauner as a foil, knowing he would likely win the election against former Democratic Governor Pat Quinn, who said he was "put on earth" to cut state worker pensions, and whose own budgets cut higher education and social spending repeatedly.

Workers and youth, who believe that education is a social right, not a privilege, must understand that there is no solution through placing pressure on the Democratic Party to defend their interests. The only way forward against austerity and in defense of public education is by fighting for the broadest mobilization of the working class and the building of a mass socialist movement.

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