

An attempt to appease anger over student loan debt

New York Governor Cuomo proposes free tuition for state and city university systems

By Josh Varlin
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New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat now in the middle of his second term in office, unveiled a proposal for free tuition at all schools in the State University of New York and City University of New York systems on January 3. The proposal would come into effect over the next three years and eventually cover an estimated 200,000 students whose families have incomes under \$125,000 a year.

SUNY and CUNY are the second and third largest public higher education systems in the US, with almost 90 campuses throughout the state and about 700,000 students between them. SUNY is partially funded by the state, while CUNY is partially funded by both the state and New York City, resulting in lower tuition at these public universities compared to private counterparts.

Cuomo announced his plan at LaGuardia Community College in Queens. Joining him for the event was Senator Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton's rival for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 2016. Free public college education was a prominent element of Sanders' platform and a factor in his overwhelming support among young people.

The proposal, if adopted by the state legislature, would fund the "Excelsior Scholarship," which would cover any tuition not already covered by federal Pell Grants or New York's state Tuition Assistance Program.

Tuition for a full-time student at a four-year SUNY school is currently \$6,470; full-time students at the two-year community colleges in the SUNY system pay \$4,350 in tuition. Tuition has gone up \$300 a year between 2011 and 2015, and SUNY is currently seeking similar increases in tuition for the next four years. Tuition at CUNY schools is roughly the same.

Cuomo has said that he would like to begin the program for the fall 2017 semester for families with annual

incomes under \$100,000, and fully implement the program with a \$125,000 cap by 2019.

Cuomo's proposal met with general praise in the media. The promise of free tuition is also seen as a way to revive the fortunes of the Democrats, licking their wounds after Hillary Clinton's loss to Donald Trump. An editorial in the *New York Times* called it "an exciting possibility," while Sanders called it "revolutionary."

A closer examination of the new proposal, however, shows that it falls far short of the needs of students from working class families. It does not cover room, board, books or other college-related expenses, which far outweigh tuition for most on-campus SUNY students. Room and board at SUNY Binghamton for the 2016-2017 school year is \$14,348, for example, more than double the cost of tuition.

While most students in the CUNY system can continue to live at home, for the SUNY campuses room and board will continue to weigh heavily in annual expenses. Despite the relative affordability of New York's vast public university systems—four-year SUNY schools' tuition is about a third below the national average for public schools—New York students still graduate with an average debt of almost \$30,000.

There are numerous other questions raised by Cuomo's initial announcement. The governor estimated that his program would cost \$163 million per year in 2019, when it is completely phased in, although this is quite likely a low estimate. A 2015 analysis by New York City's Independent Budget Office estimated that a similar program at CUNY schools would cost \$232 million. This is almost \$70 million higher than Cuomo's proposal, and does not include SUNY schools, with an overall enrollment that is significantly higher than that at CUNY.

Previous bills to provide free tuition to state residents at

SUNY and CUNY have failed to make it out of legislative committees in Albany, where corrupt Democratic and Republican politicians share control, the Republicans with a majority in the State Senate and the Democrats in the Assembly. The full plan will be included in Cuomo's executive budget proposal, which is due January 17, and the budget deadline is April 1. A weakening of Cuomo's limited proposal is quite likely. A 2014 bill, according to Politico, "required community service and state residency and employment for a period of five years after degree completion." It is possible that whatever is eventually passed will include such severe restrictions.

Finally, there is the question of higher education funding overall. Confronted with rising costs for the tuition program, the representatives of big business can be expected to cut costs in other areas, as well as in social services generally. Even the abovementioned *New York Times* editorial, while attempting to present the proposal in a positive light, was forced to warn that "the Legislature has a responsibility to make sure that the state funds all of the costs associated with this proposal without hurting the university system."

Whether or not Cuomo's proposal is enacted this year, it is clearly aimed at appeasing the anger among workers and young people at the growing inequality and attacks on living standards. This found partial reflection in the significant support for Sanders, a self-described "socialist." The presence of Sanders at Cuomo's New York City announcement is an indication that sections of the Democratic Party will use Cuomo's and similar proposals to lyingly claim once again that this party of Wall Street and war can be pressured to respond to the interests of the working class.

While Cuomo is now posturing as the defender of the "middle class," he vetoed a bipartisan bill to fund the state's public defenders on New Year's Eve. New York currently places most of the funding burden for public defenders on counties, resulting in a haphazard and underfunded system that the New York Civil Liberties Union says is unconstitutional. NYCLU Executive Director Donna Lieberman called the vetoed bill "the most important criminal justice reform legislation in memory."

The discussion of free tuition must also be understood in its historical context. CUNY was founded in 1961, but the origins of the system go back to the 1840s. For nearly 130 years it was tuition-free, and in the first half of the 20th century was sometimes called the "Harvard of the

proletariat." Tuition was imposed for the first time during the financial crisis and near-bankruptcy of the city in 1976. SUNY, the statewide system, was founded in 1948, and expanded greatly during the postwar boom of the next two decades, particularly in the administration of Governor Nelson Rockefeller, who served as the state's chief executive from 1959-1973. SUNY was not tuition-free, but tuition costs began to mount by the 1970s.

The destruction of tuition-free education in 1976 was one of the initial elements in what has become four decades of social counterrevolution. It is worth pointing out that Andrew Cuomo's father, Mario Cuomo, who was governor from 1983 to 1994, presided over a massive prison expansion, while the state and city university systems were kept on tight rations.

Cuomo's tuition proposal amounts to a pittance when compared to the incredible wealth accumulated by the hedge funds and investment banks of Wall Street. It is a far cry from the free, high-quality public education at every level that must be fought for as part of the basic rights of the working class. This can never be won through appeals to the political representatives of the super-rich. It will require a break with the Democrats, including Cuomo and Sanders, and turning to the working class in the fight for the socialist reorganization of society to meet human needs instead of private profit.

See also:

The American student loan racket (also available as a printed pamphlet or PDF)

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