

New York governor implements phony free tuition program for public higher education

By Fred Mazelis
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The much-touted program of free tuition for students in the public higher education system of New York State, signed into law by Governor Andrew Cuomo last week, is a vivid demonstration of the treachery and cynicism of the entire Democratic Party establishment.

The program, dubbed the Excelsior Scholarship in reference to the state's official motto, was first proposed at a press conference held by the governor at La Guardia Community College in New York City last January. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, the self-proclaimed democratic socialist whose campaign for the presidency attracted more than 13 million primary votes, was there to lend his support, claiming that Cuomo's plan actualized the slogan of free public higher education raised by Sanders during his campaign.

The scholarship program was included in the final state budget announced on April 7. It was signed into law by Cuomo last Wednesday, this time with the 2016 Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton present to sing the praises of Cuomo and his plan. The program provides free tuition to all families with a household income of no more than \$100,000 a year, with this cap rising to \$125,000 by 2019.

While at first glance this might appear to represent significant help, a look at the fine print of the legislation—and even the not-so-fine print—reveals that the “free tuition” will not include most expenses, and through various other exceptions will exclude the vast majority of two-year and four-year college students in the state.

Tuition is relatively modest in New York, compared not only to high-priced private colleges and universities, but also to many other state university systems around the country. This is partly the consequence of the long tradition of free tuition in New York City, a tradition that was only ended about 40 years ago, at the time of the city's near-bankruptcy. Since then tuition has steadily mounted, but remains below that in many other states.

The annual figure for the State University of New York now amounts to \$6,470. It is slightly less at the four-year colleges of City University serving New York City, and about \$4,300 at the two-year community colleges.

The financial needs of college students include not only tuition, of course. Cuomo's program does not include books, fees and room and board for students at all of the major four-year campuses in the state, including Buffalo, Albany, Binghamton, Stony Brook and elsewhere. These add about \$15,000 to the annual cost of attending college when students are away from home. By one calculation, the free tuition program will cut the cost of a four-year education at SUNY only from about \$83,000 to \$57,000. This roughly 30 percent reduction still leaves the vast majority of students, with families in New York having a median annual income of about \$60,000, scrambling to meet expenses.

This is only the most obvious drawback of the Cuomo plan. It also mandates that students complete 30 class credits annually to qualify for free tuition. In cases where students are awarded free tuition but are unable to complete 30 credits, they will have to pay back the tuition grant for the second semester. But the vast majority of students are forced to work, either to meet their own expenses or to help at home, and they struggle to complete even 12 credits per semester, or 24 annually. Most students take five, six or more years to complete their degree.

Another provision of the program is the requirement that students live and work in New York State for a minimum of as many years as they have received free tuition. For a graduate of a four-year college, that means forgoing any job opportunities elsewhere for four years, on pain of having to repay the tuition grants. A college graduate who seeks work in New York City, for example, but cannot afford the exorbitant rents now demanded in even many outlying parts of the city, would not be

allowed to live in Jersey City or Bayonne, right across the Hudson River from Manhattan in the state of New Jersey.

On top of all of these restrictions, the Excelsior Scholarship is what is known as a “last-dollar” program, meaning that it will only cover what other aid, such as federal Pell Grants and the state’s Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), does not. Since poorer students are primarily eligible for this federal and state aid, they will not receive any tuition assistance to help defray living expenses. It is especially these hundreds of thousands of working class youth, in both the two-year and four-year colleges, who must work both to cover tuition costs and also living expenses, even though, in New York City especially, many of them live at home.

As a result of the various exceptions and restrictions attached to Cuomo’s widely hailed program, officials acknowledged that as few as 32,000 students might take advantage of the free tuition plan.

One estimate counted about 20 percent of SUNY’s 400,000 students as likely to even qualify for the program, while among the more than 250,000 students at the City University of New York, a tiny number of 3,000-5,000 are expected to use the program. Among community college students, more than 90 percent are not expected to qualify, primarily because they are unable to maintain a course load of 30 credits annually.

Even though students would be able to include credits from summer semesters towards the total, that is exactly when most need to work in order to put aside money for the rest of the year.

All of the students who do not qualify for the tuition plan—the vast majority—would be hit by planned *increases* in tuition of \$1,000 annually, phased in over the next five years. In other words, the students who can least afford it will be subsidizing the state coffers so that Cuomo can demagogically claim he is helping the “middle class.”

So obvious are the limitations of Cuomo’s plan that even the *New York Times*, after welcoming the proposal last January, in an editorial this past weekend placed an asterisk next to it, referring to the governor’s “Free* College Plan,” seeking to place some distance between it and this fraudulent scheme.

While some suggest that presidential ambitions for 2020 are behind Cuomo’s moves, much more than personal aims are involved. As the high-profile Sanders and Clinton involvement illustrates, this is all part of an attempt to rebrand the Democratic Party as a party of reform, long after the crisis and decline of the capitalist

system the party represents has made such improvements impossible.

Like the half-hearted and belated embrace of a meager graduated introduction of a \$15 an hour minimum wage by local Democrats in New York, Seattle and elsewhere around the country—increases that, when finally implemented, will have lost much of their value due to inflation—it is designed to cover up the Wall Street ties of this big business party without in any way seriously impinging on the interests and demands of the hedge fund billionaires and big business as a whole. Cuomo, Clinton, Sanders and the rest are working to keep the working class trapped within the reactionary confines of this party of war and austerity.

Genuine free higher education requires, not the measly \$150 or \$160 million that Cuomo has allotted to this program, but billions of dollars, devoted to covering tuition and all other expenses, and the vast expansion and improvement of educational opportunities, including an end to the system whereby adjunct professors are overworked while being paid poverty wages.

What Cuomo proposes to spend is a virtual drop in the bucket compared to the wealth of the super-rich whose support he has energetically solicited and received throughout his career.

As the WSWS warned when Cuomo first announced his plan three months ago, a genuine program of free quality higher education will never come from any wing of the Democratic Party. It requires the building of a mass movement of the working class in opposition to both parties of capitalism, and committed to a socialist program.

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