

Graduate students protest Republican tax bill

By our reporters
1 December 2017

Thousands of graduate students and faculty members from over 40 US universities protested Wednesday against the provision to tax graduate student tuition waivers included in the Republican tax plan which passed the US Senate Committee earlier this week.

The protests, which were mostly called by various graduate student unions, took place in New York City, Alabama, California, Minnesota and Kansas. Two of the largest demonstrations occurred at UC Berkeley (300-400 graduate students) and the University of Minnesota.

The American Council for Education has calculated that the combined effect of all the House bill's provisions on higher education would increase its cost by \$65 billion over the next 10 years. Graduate students would be the hardest hit.

According to an analysis by UC Berkeley, taxes for a campus teaching assistant at this institution, which charges some \$13,793 of tuition per year, would rise by 61 percent or \$1,400 per year, and by 31 percent for a research assistant.

Emma Carroll, a Ph.D. student at UC Berkeley's molecular and cell biology department, told *Berkeleyside.com* that her stipend was "just enough to cover basic expenses." The extra taxes could force many of her fellow students to drop out and younger ones to avoid graduate education altogether. She said: "In our field, you have to go to graduate school. It's akin to an attack on biomedical research as a whole, which is not a partisan issue. Everyone gets cancer."

The increase would be even higher at private institutions such as New York University, the University of Southern California or MIT, which charge around \$50,000 in annual tuition. At MIT, for instance, which has an annual tuition rate of \$49,600, taxes for graduate students would more than triple to \$13,577, according to a report by *Berkeleyside.com*. Most graduate students have an annual stipend of less

than \$30,000. Most of the American graduate students have to pay off massive amounts of student debt from their undergraduate studies.

Especially in California and New York, where rents and the total cost of living are extremely high, graduate student life would become impossible if this tax provision was to be implemented. Graduate student education would become accessible only to the super-rich and virtually all branches of the natural sciences and humanities would be starved of new researchers.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to protesters at the graduate student walkout in New York City's Union Square which drew some 100 students from Columbia University, New York University, the City University of New York and the New School University. Banners said, "Kill the bill" and "Tax the rich." Chants included, "Tax the rich, not the poor, you won't have TA's [Teaching Assistants] no more."

Taylor, a graduate student of history at NYU, said: "I came here to protest the GOP bill because I just want to be able to exist in this world, in academia. Especially living in New York City, I don't think I would be able to go to grad school anymore if this bill gets through. I also need to pay off student loans. I think education should just be kept accessible for people from all economic backgrounds. It is true that it is hardly accessible for everyone now, but this bill would make it even worse."

Irinia, a Ph.D. student in psychology at CUNY, told the WSW: "I'm an international student, I'm from Argentina and am studying here on a research fellowship. I think that if this bill passes, international students won't be coming to the US anymore and at this point, they often constitute about 50 percent of the classes [at the graduate level]. In general, what is going on politically now in the US is pretty scary."

Austin, who is a graduate student in the physics

department of NYU, said: “It is clear that this bill is for the wealthy and the donors who finance those who are proposing this legislation. It will be difficult to remove all the money from the political system, I think it’s kind of hopeless.”

Kim Adams is in the graduate program for a Ph.D. in English at New York University and a member of Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC). She explained to the WSWS, “Under the tax bill, my tax bill would go up because the tuition charge that NYU waives would be claimed to be income, even though I never see this income. If I were still in course work, my taxable income would double because, with the college charging \$8,000 for a class, I would have a larger tuition waiver. I am almost done with my program but the tax charge would mean I need to take on the burden of teaching an extra course to make up the difference. However, for someone just starting out, a newly promising student may just go to another career when faced with this larger cost.”

Pauline, a passerby who decided to join the protest, told a reporter: “I believe that all student debt and medical debt should be canceled. These debts are negatively impacting on our mental health. The corporate media say that we are divided, but there is a growing opposition to austerity. The 2008 bailout of the banks was widely unpopular. There is an increasing opposition to economic inequality.”

The rally was politically dominated by the universities’ graduate unions, especially the GSOC and the pseudo-left organizations such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Encouraging the chant of pro-union songs (“Get up, get down, New York is a union town”), they all avoided discussing both the political significance of the tax bill at large and the role of the Democratic Party in the bipartisan assault on higher education.

Their perspective amounts to pressuring the Democratic Party to make limited and temporary concessions to the interests of academics and graduate students. The Senate tax bill does not include the provision to tax graduate tuition waivers as income. It will likely be put to a full vote this week and if it passes, both tax plans would have to be reconciled. The main aim of the graduate student unions at this point is to pressure Democratic senators and congressmen to

vote for a version of the tax bill which, while still providing for a massive transfer of wealth from the working and middle classes to the oligarchy, would not directly attack graduate students.

A genuine and successful struggle in defense of higher education requires a break with precisely this perspective and a turn of students toward the working class.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>