

# City University of New York to layoff thousands of adjunct faculty amid financial crisis

By Elliott Murtagh  
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The City University of New York (CUNY) system is beginning to implement sweeping budget cuts triggered by New York state's estimated \$13.3 billion loss in tax revenue due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

So far, administration is targeting thousands of adjunct faculty members for layoff and are looking to significantly reduce the number of classes being offered. These austerity measures will have a devastating impact on the largest urban university system in the US, forcing faculty and students to bear the brunt of the current crisis.

While New York Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo is slated to announce details on the first round of state cuts in the coming days, a CUNY memo distributed in April said that up to \$95.3 million could be slashed from its budget through combined city and state cuts.

The US CARES Act allocated over \$100 million to CUNY for institutional needs stemming from the pandemic, but it is unclear what this money is going towards since CUNY administration has informed its 25 colleges—which enroll 275,000 students and employ 6,700 full-time faculty members and 10,000 adjunct faculty members—to prepare for significant financial losses.

Within the last month, John Jay College in Manhattan announced it will not be rehiring all 450 of its adjuncts that work on a semester-to-semester basis and comprise nearly 40 percent of the school's faculty positions. Similar announcements have been made by City College, Queens College and the College of Staten Island. Brooklyn College has ordered department chairs to cut course offerings for next semester by 25 percent and to increase class sizes. These actions have set a precedent for the rest of the CUNY system.

In response, adjuncts—who earn low wages, rely on their university job for health insurance, and are often graduate students financing their education—are taking to social media to voice their anger and concern, posting oppositional material on Twitter under the hashtag,

#cutCOVIDnotCUNY.

Much of the material on Twitter addresses the need to eliminate the deadly spread of COVID-19, rather than an essential public university system and the basic needs of its faculty, staff and students. As of May 6, CUNY has reported that 14 faculty, 10 staff and 3 students have died from COVID-19.

One CUNY adjunct on Twitter said, "I've been an adjunct going on 15 years and to have my health care cut during a pandemic is unconscionable, not to mention the devastation our students will face with larger classes and minimal choices."

Others have pointed to the need to tax the rich in order to save CUNY, which was founded as a free university system for New York City's working class and only started charging tuition after the city's 1975-76 fiscal crisis. One adjunct tweeted, "1 in 6 billionaires lives in NY—it is possible to have a free CUNY AGAIN." A proposed \$320 tuition hike will be voted on by the CUNY Board of Trustees in June.

CUNY students have also taken a stand against the budget cuts and firing of adjuncts. A Brooklyn College student speaking to the school's *Vanguard* newspaper said, "CUNY is located in the epicenter of the pandemic and to propose austerity measures at such a time is simply cruel. Instead of going after the billionaires and the ultra-wealthy, Governor Cuomo wants to eliminate a source of income and health insurance from people that need it to survive."

Struggling students (42 percent of incoming CUNY freshmen come from households with incomes of \$20,000 or less) are also demanding a tuition freeze for the duration of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Professional Staff Congress (PSC), the union that supposedly represents 30,000 CUNY faculty and staff, has issued token statements against the budget cuts and layoffs and called for a car and bike caravan outside Cuomo's New York City office in protest. On Wednesday, the PSC joined

several other unions in calling for a tax on billionaires to prevent statewide budget cuts, a cheap and toothless proclamation that neither the unions nor the Democrats will implement.

The PSC is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), an organization that seeks to uphold the authority of the corporate Democratic Party, which has proven to be no less an enemy of public education than the Republicans. The AFT was instrumental in betraying the 2018-19 wave of US teacher strikes against social inequality and austerity measures imposed by both big business parties, isolating each state strike and preventing them from coalescing into a national strike, while forcing through agreements that abandoned teachers' demands.

Earlier this month, the PSC's president, Barbara Bowen, who is also one of forty Vice Presidents of the AFT, negotiated with the CUNY administration to push back the deadline for schools to notify adjuncts of termination from May 15 to May 29, the day after grades are due.

A Hunter College adjunct on Twitter reacted to this development: "PSC shouldn't be negotiating with the boss on when they can fire us. It feels as if the union is in bed with CUNY—this negotiation is all in the favor of the bosses—not us. They don't need help firing us. This hurts our ability to organize adjuncts around a grade strike, etc. PSC has negotiated the new date, and it just happens to be the day after grades are due? Huge pressure point has now been taken away from us. Thanks."

According to several reports, the union shut down any vote on strike action at a recent PSC delegate assembly, although this demand was repeatedly raised by delegates. PSC officials reportedly stated that strike activity is illegal and cannot be considered.

Since then, Rank and File Action (RAFA), a faction of the PSC, has sought to pressure the union leadership by launching a campaign threatening grade strike action. The group called on CUNY faculty to pledge via a Google document to withhold grades for the semester after the May 28 grade deadline and May 29 adjunct-reappointment notification deadline, but only if they received seventy percent pledge support from the entire CUNY faculty—nearly 12,000 signatures.

Making this unlikely pledge goal a requirement before calling a CUNY-wide grade strike was essentially calling the strike off in the same breath that it called for one. On Thursday, RAFA announced that they had received a total of nearly 800 faculty signatures and called on faculty to not withhold their grades beyond the deadline.

No struggle against the budget cuts can be done through the PSC. As with all the unions, the PSC functions to channel working class dissent behind the Democratic Party

in the form of pleas for modest reforms that the capitalist system is unable and unwilling to grant.

The pandemic is being used as a cover for deeper assaults—which were already taking place before the spread of the coronavirus—on public education and other social rights. Public primary and secondary schools in New York City are already facing budget cuts of \$827 million, with more to come. There is widespread opposition by educators and parents to this austerity.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority has borrowed tens of billions of dollars in the form of bond issues before and during the pandemic, which Wall Street will demand be repaid from the livelihood of transit workers, 107 of whom have died from COVID-19 because of inadequate protection on buses and subways.

Recently, graduate workers at New York University participated in a three-day sickout and graduate workers at Columbia University have gone on strike, both protesting each university's negligent response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The criminal response of the American ruling class to the coronavirus pandemic has led to the deaths of over 100,000 to date and a bailout, passed with unanimous support by both Republicans and Democrats, that provides trillions of dollars for Wall Street and big business, while crucial social services and the working class face crushing austerity.

CUNY faculty and students must draw the political conclusions from the conduct of the Democrats and the unions over the last four months and turn to the struggles of workers in New York, the US and internationally, in response to the expanding economic, health and social crisis stemming from the pandemic. New organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees composed of graduate students and all education workers, must be organized to demand that trillions be made available to protect their jobs, education, and health, while also protecting and funding essential social services.

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