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States' Budget Crises: Share the Pain and Share the Dough Left Margin By Carl Bloice BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board

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It's probable that by the time this is read, officials in San Jose, Ca. will have eliminated athletic programs from all 11 of the city's high schools. It might not seem like much to some, given the declining economic situation in the country and the kinds of budget cuts being made in other areas. But parents are protesting. In California, not having football, basketball and soccer as part of a school's activities is not something taken lightly. What's more, cutting out sports is only part of it. The school district leadership is also moving to reduce the amount of money spent on teachers and other personnel, administration and support staff and services. "Cutting sports may seem mild compared with other scenarios floating around Sacramento, like knocking a month off the school year," the *San Jose Mercury News* said this week, referring to deliberations in the state capital.

Something similar is happening in Las Vegas where proposed school budget cuts, says the *Las Vegas Sun*, "will lead to bigger classes, fewer extracurricular activities and layoffs." However, this latest slashing of the budgetary knife is only a small example of the draconian moves being taken or contemplated to meet the financial crisis facing all 50 states and their cities.

From inner city schools to state healthcare services, programs and institutions are being savaged to meet the requirement that state budgets be balanced even as prices rise and tax revenue income declines. And, as might be expected, the biggest sacrifices

are being assigned to low income working class families and individuals, the elderly and the young.

Last week, there was a mock funeral march in San Francisco to draw attention to the sharp budget cuts being pushed through by the mayor, - especially in the area of health and homeless services. While the city adamantly refuses to reduce subsidies for the opera and the ballet, Mayor Gavin Newsom plans to reduce spending for healthcare by \$10 million, including cutting things like the Adult Day Health Center. Like recreational facilities and sports in schools, support for cultural activities is an important part of the life of an urban center (the Baltimore Opera just went bankrupt. Not good). But the uneven handedness in this case is stirring resentment. "As much as we appreciate the need to support the arts, we're going to have to look at other avenues some of those folks can turn to, to get the funding that is needed," says newly-elected Supervisor David Campos. "People who have the greatest needs don't have those options. You have to make sure you are protecting those who have the greatest need."

Much of the cutbacks in education and social services are taking place under the radar. The major media reports diligently on the budget conflicts, treating them largely as contests between the leaderships of the two major political parties. Just who stands to be directly affected goes largely unreported. Most people in the nation are probably not aware that students in California have been holding public protests all year against cuts in the state's university and college system. At a time when we are being repeatedly advised that holding a college degree is the perquisite for finding adequate employment in today's economic world, and that education is the perquisite for the country's economic competitiveness, the state's higher education centers are raising tuition and limiting the number of young people they will take in.

What's being visited upon education on the local level is also being enacted in the state capitals.

With the California state budget gap now projected to reach \$30 billion by next July, the State Senate Budget Subcommittee is considering cutbacks that Hanh Kim Quach, Health Care Policy coordinator for Health Access California, notes "have already been heard and rejected several times this past decade" and would make "extremely low-income seniors pay more and low-income children get less." The proposed cuts, she writes include:

- "Denying nearly a half-million low-income working parents Medi-Cal coverage, by lowering the eligibility from 100 percent to 72 percent of poverty level, cutting off eligibility for parents in families of three making more than \$13,000."
- "Eliminating dental, vision, podiatry and several other benefits for 2.5 million parents, seniors, and people with disabilities on Medi-Cal coverage."
- "Siphoning funds away from public hospitals on which we all rely."

As if to add insult to injury, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has also moved to totally eliminate the renters' tax credit, a state income tax deduction. That move will make it even harder for low income people - especially seniors - to make ends meet.

At a senior advocacy group monthly meeting and holiday party last week the news of the budget cuts in San Francisco brought audible groans from those in attendance, many of whom would go from there to the mock funeral at Civic Center later in the afternoon. "It's time we stand up and say we have had enough," one speaker at the Senior Action Network gathering said. "These cuts are hitting hardest at the most vulnerable. Those who have the most should bear the brunt of the cuts. And furthermore, we need to get a seat at the table where these decisions are made."

The "real immediate need right now lies with state and local governments," former U.S. Labor Secretary Robert Reich noted in his blog Dec. 12. "States and locales are already showing shortfalls in the range of \$70 to \$100 billion this fiscal year, and they can't officially go into deficit. That means they're starting to whack public services - teachers, police and fire, social workers, admission to state universities, garbage collections, you name it."

"Most of the public has no idea what happens on Wall Street and hasn't even heard of TARP; and a big portion of the public doesn't really believe that if the Big Three implode they'll be hurt," wrote Reich. "But when it comes to their own local services, it's a different story. To them, these are the only things government really does. And cuts in these services, on the magnitude just starting to happen, will generate a holler on Main Street so loud as to crack the windows of every member of Congress back home this holiday season."

From irate parents in San Jose to stirred-up seniors in San Francisco, from anti-eviction protestors in Boston to 300 laid-off sit-down protestors in Chicago, resistance is growing. Quite often one hears references to the cost of the war in Iraq and comparisons of the service cutbacks and the bailouts of the banks. As capitalism worldwide slips deeper and deeper into crisis, the question of equity and fairness is emerging sharply. Why must the biggest and most devastating sacrifices be foisted off on the least advantaged?

Members of the Rocking Solidarity Labor Chorus were on hand for the senior activists' San Francisco meeting and the audience joined in when they rendered their new song "Share the Dough" to the tune of "Let It Snow."

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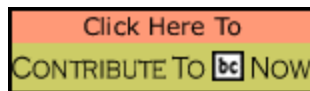
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