Thousands of public college students gathered at the Capitol on Monday to protest cutbacks in state aid to colleges and rising collegiate fees.

They joined an expanding club of those with stakes in the deficit-ridden state budget who dislike what's happening – furloughed state workers, home health care providers and recipients, doctors who serve the poor, teachers, even farmers whose open space subsidies have been eliminated.

Each stakeholder group makes its case with as much drama as it can muster, often with stories of horrendous effects, real or apocryphal. Surely, each argues, money can be found to avoid draconian cutbacks in its particular program. Surely something else – fill in the blank – is less important to the welfare of the state.

The simple fact, however, is that their demands, including those already in law, add up to tens of billions of dollars more than the state's recession-battered revenue system can muster, even with the temporary tax increases enacted a year ago.

The gap is likely to widen unless there is some very explosive recovery from the worst recession since the Great Depression. And chances of that happening are nil, even the most optimistic economists concede. It would take a decade of record-high economic growth to wipe out job losses from this recession.

More tax increases are politically impossible, as even the Legislature's pro-tax Democratic leaders acknowledge. Their most optimistic scenario is for revenues to pick up a little bit and for the federal government, whose budget deficits are proportionately bigger than California's, to give us a few extra billion dollars.

Even were the Democrats' rosy scenario to become reality, California would still be left with at least a $10 billion deficit, which would still require more of the cuts that the college students and other protesters abhor.

The larger public, meanwhile, just wants Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Legislature to get on with it.

A new Field Poll says that the economy and the budget crisis are the two most important issues to voters in this election year – and there's almost nothing that the state can do about the economy, at least in the short run.
There are, in brief, no pain-free fixes to this crisis, one born of irresponsible fiscal decision making earlier in the decade and compounded by the recession.

The short-term gimmicks that the governor and lawmakers have employed merely avoid the day of fiscal reckoning – and make it worse.

The crisis will continue for years and may even get worse as the temporary taxes expire, as shortfalls in public employee pensions and retiree health care bite, and as the new federal health insurance program kicks in, pressuring the state to pick up the tab for many low-income residents.

The aggrieved can protest all they want, but they cannot change that reality.