California Republicans propose drastic cuts in social spending

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On July 6, Republican lawmakers in California provided an indication of their "vision" for the state when, after much delay, they announced their proposed amendments to the revised budget presented last May by Democratic Governor Gray Davis. The Republicans presented 131 measures to close the state's $38 billion shortfall, representing, in sum, an unprecedented assault on the working and poor people of the state and a massive windfall for big business and the rich.

The Republican plan went far beyond the already punitive and reactionary budget measures proposed by Davis and the Democrats. It had more the character of a political provocation than a serious proposal to solve the state's fiscal crisis. It was defeated 45-27, in a party-line vote.

The first target of the Republican budget plan was the public school system. It called for $615 million in cuts to elementary education on top of the $291 million proposed by Davis. It entailed postponing kindergarten for some 110,000 five-year-olds for one year, a measure that would make possible the layoff of thousands of teachers.

The Republicans further called for massive cuts in the public university system, slashing an amount equivalent to the allotment for one major campus. The Democrats had proposed cutting $454 million from the budget for community colleges; the Republicans countered with a proposed cut of $782 million. The state's community college system is the point of entry into higher education for hundreds of thousands of working class youth, especially the most impoverished layers.

Citing community outreach programs in the California State University system as an example of "wasteful expenditures," the Republican leaders proposed eliminating the $50 million program.

Another amendment called for $497 million to be cut from the state's welfare grant program, forcing tens of thousands of welfare recipients into destitution.

The Republicans would also cut funds for abortions, close shelters for battered women, end all medical programs not reimbursed by the federal government and abolish the state's Arts Council. They would further slash $450 million from the state's prison system and reduce funding for the California Youth Authority, the agency responsible for youthful offenders, by 60 percent.

The plan would do away with the Coastal Commission, giving developers a free hand to build on the state's scenic coastlines, and remove restrictions on offshore oil drilling.

It would eliminate health care coverage for Native Americans.

Other examples of the predatory character of the Republican plan are a proposal to withhold $50 payments to poor blind people that go toward the feeding of their seeing-eye dogs and a measure that would force poor children to re-qualify for medical benefits under the state health plan for uninsured children.

Under the Republican plan, tuition at public colleges would rise well beyond the 30 percent projected under the Democratic budget, which would translate into additional $1,150 per student at the University of California system. Higher education even at the two-year community college level would, as a result, be beyond the reach of many working class youth.

Also slated for elimination by the Republicans are the state's Seismic Safety Commission, which is in charge of earthquake preparedness, and environmental agencies that enforce anti-pollution laws against corporate violators. Enforcement of clean water and food safety laws would also be crippled.

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At the same time, the Republican plan demands that previously approved tax breaks and perks for corporations remain in effect.

The longer term aim of the Republican plan is to gut what remains of the social safety net, undermine the public education and health systems so as to open the door to privatization, and eliminate all restrictions on the corporate drive for profit and accumulation of wealth by the privileged elite.

Its shorter term political aim is equally transparent: to block the passage of a new budget so as to plunge the state into insolvency, destabilize the Davis administration and promote the recall initiative that is being bankrolled by multimillionaire Republican Congressman Darrell Issa and his corporate backers. Although the Republican caucus is a minority in the state legislature, it has sufficient votes to reject any budget proposed by the governor under a two-thirds majority requirement of the state constitution.

The Democrats, for their part, propose a somewhat less onerous, but nevertheless brutal, attack on the working class. On the basic premise that the interests of the corporate elite must be defended at the expense of the jobs and social conditions of the working people, they are in agreement with their Republican opponents.

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