

California social programs threatened with devastation following special election

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A small fraction of eligible California voters went to the polls last Tuesday to cast ballots on six propositions designed to remedy the state's multibillion-dollar budget shortfall through regressive tax increases and cuts in essential programs. Despite support from Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Democratic-controlled state legislature, all were trounced except one that prohibits salary increases for certain state officials during budget deficit years.

One of the defeated measures extended regressive tax increases by two years and halted funding for social programs by compelling contributions to a "rainy day" fund. Another authorized multibillion-dollar bonds financed through future state lottery proceeds. The others slashed hundreds of millions of dollars from programs benefiting the mentally ill and early childhood development programs.

Schwarzenegger responded to the news of the propositions' defeat, stating, "The message was clear from the people, go all out and make those cuts and live within your means." The governor also showed disregard for democratic process, adding that the voters had sent out a message to "Go and do your work yourself. Don't come to us with your problems."

State Democrats and their sympathizers also weighed in on the propositions' failures. John L. Burton, chair of the California Democratic Party, remarked, "People are going to have to figure out: Do they want schools, do they want roads, do they want public safety, do they want to take care of the less fortunate?" The *Los Angeles Times* published an editorial immediately after the vote was taken, entitled, "California voters exercise

their power—and that's the problem."

The notion being put forward by Schwarzenegger, the Democrats and the media alike—that the state's working class is now responsible for devastating California's once extensive and accessible network of social programs—should be treated with contempt. Voters were forced to choose between rotten austerity measures and slightly less rotten austerity measures funded with regressive tax increases. The latest round of budget propositions were not motivated by a desire to give voters a chance to exercise their democratic rights, or even to try to balance the budget. The special election was instead a calculated attempt to shift blame for the budget crisis from the California ruling and financial elite onto the working class.

Only a few days after the vote, state officials are already implementing devastating attacks on what remains of the state's social safety net. More than \$5 billion is proposed to be slashed from public education on top of the more than \$8 billion already cut from the 2009-2010 budget, which will result in more teacher layoffs on top of the 30,000 threatened with losing their jobs at the end of this school year.

Schwarzenegger has already announced plans to end the CalGrants program, which provides financial aid to lower and middle income students, and has even threatened to end the state's welfare program along with medical insurance for low-income children.

California is estimated to be somewhere between the fifth and eighth largest economy in the world. But as the carnage began in Sacramento, the Obama administration pledged not to lend any assistance

whatsoever to the beleaguered state. A host of White House officials made clear on Thursday that California must solve its problems alone and cannot expect any help from Washington, which has spent hundreds of billions to bail out Wall Street with no strings attached.

Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner announced, “We do not believe that TARP as currently designed and legislated provides a viable solution to this specific challenge.” David Axelrod, senior advisor to Barack Obama, rationalized the administration’s decision, stating, “Whatever we do for one state, there will be other states who also will want to do that. And there’s a limit to what the government can do.”

There is only “a limit to what the government can do” when it comes to protecting the health of working class families and educating their children. There is no comparable limit on what it will do to protect the fortunes of the financial gangsters responsible for the world economic collapse.

The Schwarzenegger and Obama administrations have made clear their intention to roll back social gains won through generations of struggle throughout the state. The facts clearly speak for themselves. The state of California is often a political bellwether for the rest of the nation and this particular case is no exception. A majority of states are facing severe budget crises of their own and will attempt to implement similar austerity measures.



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