

More cuts to social services in Michigan

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The destruction of basic social services in the state of Michigan and its largest city, Detroit, have continued in recent days. Detroit has announced drastic cuts to its already limited public transportation system, while lawmakers in the state capital, Lansing, are haggling over massive reductions in social spending in order to meet a budget deficit by the end of September.

Detroit will cut services to dozens of bus routes, it was announced on Thursday. Eight weekend and two weekday routes will be eliminated completely, while bus frequency will be reduced on 35 additional bus lines. A total of 113 drivers will be laid off. The service reductions and firings will begin almost immediately, on September 26. This will be followed on October 2 by 381 layoffs of mechanics and phone operators who handle bus route questions.

Mayor Dave Bing ordered the cuts at the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) as part of his bid to force the city's residents and the city workforce to pay for the economic crisis. Detroit confronts a \$80 million cash shortfall for this year and a \$300 million accumulated budget deficit.

The bus cuts will have a devastating impact. Tens of thousands of residents depend on the bus system, as limited as it is, to get them to their jobs and their schools. The service cuts will undoubtedly increase unemployment and create new obstacles for the youth to move about the city safely.

Those most dependent on the routes to be eliminated are school children and the elderly, according to Henry Gaffney, president of the bus drivers' union, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 26.

"They're really not looking at how this is going to

hurt the citizens of Detroit," Gaffney told the *Detroit Free Press*. "They've cut off all service for the senior citizens who use the bus to go to Eastern Market on Saturdays."

William Guyton, 26, depends on the bus to take him to nursing school in the nearby suburb of Southfield and to his job as a clinician at the Detroit Medical Center. He said the loss of his bus route will prevent him from carrying on his education and work. "I don't think it will be possible," he told the *Free Press*.

Charlene Lust is 25 and seven months pregnant. Her bus line will see an increased wait time, to 40 minutes between buses. "I don't have family," Lust told the *Detroit News*. "I can't call someone for a ride. I just have myself."

Al Smith, 57, rides a bus every day for medical treatment. "I'll be in trouble, big trouble," Smith said of the elimination of his bus.

Kurt Metzger, a demographer with the Detroit-Area Community Information System, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that public transportation is among the most essential services a city can provide, and that cuts tend to have unanticipated ripple effects on broader social conditions.

"The region is already so ill-equipped to provide public transportation," Metzger pointed out. "But because most jobs are found outside of Detroit, and because auto insurance premiums are so high in this state and especially the city, the bus system becomes so critical."

The cuts will likely increase unemployment, Metzger said. "When these sorts of decisions are made, nobody

asks questions like: If you're living on the southeast side of Detroit and you don't have a car, what do you have to go through to get and maintain a job elsewhere in the region?"

Metzger explained that people waiting longer at bus stops may be more exposed to crime, that commuting times will increase significantly, and that where bus service is eliminated, "it will only exacerbate the problems that are already there."

Detroit is not the only city in Michigan cutting public transportation. The public transportation authority of Ann Arbor, in southeast Michigan, has threatened to suspend bus service to nearby Ypsilanti. Many workers commute on the buses to Ann Arbor, home of the University of Michigan, but the city of Ypsilanti has been unable to pay Ann Arbor for these bus links. On Tuesday, the Ypsilanti city council proposed a new agreement that would result in the reduction of bus services.

Meanwhile, school districts in the Detroit area are proceeding with plans to cut educational programs and fire teachers. At a Thursday night public meeting, school officials in the suburb of Hazel Park outlined severe cuts to grade school education. School officials proposed ending all junior high school athletic programs, music band for fifth and sixth graders, and all elementary school physical education.

Parents at the meeting reacted in anger. "They wanted to eliminate all the programs from the students and I think we have to start cutting from the administrative office first," said Susan Hemele. In response to parents' resistance, school officials said they would reconsider the cuts, but warned of layoffs and said that school staff could go without paychecks in coming months.

Twenty-nine schools in Detroit itself have been shut down over the past several months, and the city is demanding wage and benefit concessions from teachers.

In the coming months and years, the crisis confronting Michigan's school districts, cities and towns, will be exacerbated by the state budget crisis.

Michigan faces a \$2.8 billion deficit that must be resolved by October 1, the end of the current fiscal year. This week, Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm proposed \$1.2 billion in spending cuts. Granholm's budget will eliminate \$290 million from the state's school aid fund over two years, or about \$363 per student, in addition to substantially cutting state funding for municipalities.

Both Democratic and Republican legislators insist that Granholm's cuts do not go far enough. House Speaker Andy Dillon, also a Democrat, called the plan "showboating" and "theatrics" and said it has "no chance of passing."

If no budget is passed by October 1, government services could be suspended.



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