Michigan governor again takes axe to education

Tom Eley
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Jennifer Granholm, the Democratic governor of Michigan, on Thursday announced yet another drastic funding reduction for public education in the state.

The cut, which is likely to be made effective in one month, would reduce per-pupil funding by $127 per student, and comes on the heels of a $165-per-head reduction Granholm signed into law on Monday. Also on Monday, Granholm used her veto power to slash a further $54 million in funding to so-called "high-spending" school districts.

The combined per-student cut now stands at just under $300, a 4 percent cut in the $7,316 minimum currently mandated by state law. Schools targeted by Granholm's Monday veto may lose as much as $600 per student.

Granholm attributed the latest cuts to a sharper than expected decline in sales tax revenues that fund public education. She also said the state legislature had not secured funding for the school spending bill it passed last month.

Sales tax receipts are $90 million off estimates that were produced in May, and school funding for the year will fall $212 million short, according to state Treasurer Robert Kleine. "Sales tax is down 10 percent compared to a year ago," Kleine said. "We expected it to be down 8 percent."

Granholm presented the cuts as a gambit to force the legislature to raise further funding. Senate Republicans, and some House Democrats, have categorically refused any form of tax increase. Granholm proposes a series of regressive sales tax increases.

"They've got to represent their districts in the best way that they deem possible," Granholm said. "And when they put on the scale what is more important, is it more important to fund public education in my district or is it more important to never ever, ever, ever, ever, ever raise any, any, any revenue whatsoever, it is my hope that children will weigh more."

The only purpose of these comments is to shift the blame for the cuts as much as possible to the Republicans. If Granholm truly wished to defend public education, she could simply have vetoed the school funding bill passed by the legislature. Instead, she signed Monday's bill into law, went over and beyond the bill by vetoing another $54 million, and then yesterday announced the new cuts.

Kevin McLogan, a representative of the Michigan Parent Teacher Student Association (MPTSA), told the *World Socialist Web Site* the cuts would be "devastating."

"A lot of terrible things are going to happen," he said. "There are a lot of districts that are already in tough shape. They will be pushed to the edge of receivership."

"For other schools, there will be lot of cutting around the edges," McLogan continued. "They will curtail busing, after-school programs, community education and alternative education. Some districts will increase the amount of kids in the classroom, institute shorter school years, and force teachers to buy more of their own supplies."

The fact that the successive cuts have come in the middle of the school year will accentuate the crisis. "These schools had to have a budget in place by June 30 with no idea with what was to come," McLogan said.

According to the *Detroit News*, the new cuts would mean a reduction of $25 million in funding to the Detroit public school system, which has already announced the shutdown of dozens of schools in the past year and attacked the jobs and wages of its teachers.

Robert Bobb, the emergency financial director of the Detroit schools appointed by Granholm, reportedly based his savage cuts to the city's public education on the assumption that the state would this year cut funding by $110 per student. The cut will be nearly three times that amount.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a teacher at a Detroit high school. "I can't imagine what further cuts will do," she said. "I work in a high school that doesn't have enough math books for students, and where there isn't a single math teacher. The classrooms will become even more overcrowded. Children will leave. Teachers who are already under enormous amounts of stress from overcrowding are going to suffer more."

Referring to the political row in Lansing between Granholm and Senate Republicans, the teacher said "working people have to realize they don't have a dog in

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this fight. None of them are concerned with the impact of these cuts. The teachers don't matter. The students don't matter."

"We have to fight this. There was already one revolution in this country over taxation without representation, and that's where we are now."

The cuts will impoverish education not just in Detroit, but all over the state.

"Right now our faith in Lansing is at an all-time low," Grand Rapids Public Schools spokesman John Helmholdt told a local news station. "You take $165 and almost double down on that, it's going to put a lot of districts into receivership. We're on the brink of that. We are on the brink of a bankruptcy."

The superintendent of Royal Oak Public schools, Thomas Moline, was described by the *Detroit News* as "dumbstruck" by the new cut. He calculates his school will now lose 7 percent of its budget in the midst of the school year.

"As we moved into September, we thought we might have to absorb the $165," said Moline. Then came Granholm's Monday veto of funding for high-spending districts, which Moline called "a complete surprise and devastating enough."

"But now, we add another $127 per pupil," he said. "I think that's devastation."

Rolfe Timmerman, the superintendent of Saugatuck Public Schools in western Michigan, said his district has been forced into immediate discussions about reducing services. The district is "talking about what programs we're cutting," he told the *Holland Sentinel*. "Is it AP [advanced placement] classes, is it busing?"

The superintendent for Wyoming and Godwin Heights districts, Jon Felske, condemned lawmakers of both parties. "Our leaders are failing us," he said. "Everyone has an education platform, yet they're putting schools in a position where they'll have to reduce services, go bankrupt or out of business."

In spite of the cuts to education, Michigan's budget remains unresolved. Lawmakers signed a temporary budget just after the mandated deadline at the end of September, which will expire at the end of this month.

Yet the unanimity with which they have axed education demonstrates that there is fundamental agreement among Granholm, Senate Republicans, and House Democrats that the state's working class must foot the bill for the economic crisis.

Indeed, behind Michigan's fiscal collapse is the impoverishment of its working class. This is the direct cause of the shortfall in the school fund. The drop in sales tax revenue results from unemployed and underpaid workers forgoing consumer spending. At the same time, unemployment has also gutted income tax revenue, and local governments are suffering from the erosion in real estate values that determine property taxes.

Rather than reversing the tide of unemployment through necessary public works projects, the Obama administration insists that any recovery must be "market driven," and officials in every state are compounding unemployment by laying off and furloughing state workers.

The unemployment rate in Michigan stands at 15.3 percent, the highest mark in the nation, and shows no signs of coming down. Three quarters of a million Michigan workers are now looking for a job; the unofficial jobless rate is far higher.

Joblessness has increased in every one of the state's 83 counties over the past year, with no region spared, a surge attributable to the ripple effects from the collapse of the auto industry. Twenty-two counties actually have higher unemployment than the state average.

"Early in the recession, it looked like certain parts of the state were avoiding the pain," analyst Jim Rhein of the state Department of Energy, Labor & Economic Growth told the *Detroit News*. "You'd see a real disparity between the I-75 corridor [eastern Michigan] and the western part of the state."

"But that's all out the window now. It just hit everyone across the board," including the state's rural counties. "What may seem like a small event here can be a big deal there. Even if it's just 150 jobs, it's like a Big Three plant closing in Detroit. It has the same kind of devastation."

In fact, the county with the highest unemployment rate in the state is sparsely populated Baraga County in the Upper Peninsula, with 24.3 percent unemployment.

In some cities, the unemployment statistics are at levels reminiscent of the Great Depression. Highland Park and Pontiac shared the worst official rate in September, at 35.2 percent, followed by Detroit (27.9 percent), Flint (26.3 percent), and Port Huron (25.7 percent.)

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