

US states prepare unprecedented cuts to social spending

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Erosion in support for the right-wing policies of the Obama administration and the Democratic Party was starkly illustrated by the loss of control over a host of state legislative chambers and governorships in the recent midterm elections. With the dust settling, both parties have falsely claimed that the election results are an expression of a turn to the right by the population, and are now drawing up plans for massive budget cuts.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Republican Party won at least 675 state legislative seats in the election, a record, and now control 53 percent of the total seats across the country. The Republicans also gained full control over 19 legislative chambers in which they did not previously have majorities. In gubernatorial elections, the Democrats won office in five states, but lost in 11, for a net loss of six. Republicans now control both the governor's mansion and the legislature in 16 states.

Additionally, the formerly Democratic-controlled Oregon House of Representatives is now evenly split between the two big business parties, while control of New York's Senate is still undecided pending the result of recounts. Out of 99 state legislative chambers nationwide, the Republicans now hold 54.

Some of the Democratic losses were of historic dimensions. The North Carolina Senate and the Alabama legislature had not been controlled by Republicans since the Reconstruction era in the 1870s. New Hampshire, recently a solidly "blue" state, was a bloodbath for the Democrats, who lost 114 seats in the House and went from having a 216-173 majority to being outnumbered almost 3-1.

The staggering defeat suffered by the Democrats was of their own making. Two years ago, as well as in the 2006 midterm elections, the Democratic Party won lopsided victories based on the overwhelming popular

anger toward the George W. Bush administration, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, attacks on democratic rights and the living standards of the broad masses. Though Democrats controlled the White House, the Senate and House by sizable majorities, as well as a majority of state house and legislatures, these policies were not only continued, but deepened. The result was mass abstention among the Democrats' "base" of working class, minority and youthful voters, and even a shift to the Republicans among some.

Now the legislatures and governors return in January with a supposed "mandate" to carry out even more right-wing policies, whether Republican or Democrat. The result will be the deepest cuts in spending ever enacted at the state level, which will considerably deepen the social misery in the US.

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the projected combined deficit for all states for the 2012 fiscal year is approximately \$140 billion, an increase from the current fiscal year's combined deficit of \$125 billion. Last year's shortfall represented roughly 19 percent of the total combined state budgets. The primary cause of the deficits has been falling tax revenues, attributable to job losses, combined with increased demand for social services. These trends will continue.

In the face of unprecedented state budgetary crises, both the Democrats and Republicans fully accept the premise that the budgets must be balanced on the backs of the working class. The seriousness with which this will be pursued is indicated by the extent to which some politicians are boasting about how ruthless they will be.

Incoming Pennsylvania governor Tom Corbett, at a meeting of Republican governors reportedly said he would ask of every state agency, "Why do you exist?"

Corbett has made cutting the budget a top priority for his administration, and has openly looked to the example of Governor Chris Christie in New Jersey. The latter closed state psychiatric institutions, cut 7 percent of school funding, and laid off thousands of state workers. So far, Corbett has announced that he will demand a 10 percent across-the-board cut in administrative costs as well as a large reduction in the fleet of state vehicles. He has indicated that he will single out for the deepest cuts the departments of Public Welfare and Community and Economic Development.

For Republicans, taking the helm of a state in deep fiscal crisis provides an opportunity to simply dispense with many forms of government that benefit working class people—placing in question all those services outside of prisons and the repressive apparatus of the state. “While we’re all facing these challenges, there are incredible opportunities for us to go look at what the core missions of government were, and redefine the role,” said Nikki Haley, the governor-elect of South Carolina. “We’re going to have to scale back.”

At the same meeting of Republican governors, Chris Christie encouraged his colleagues to seize the initiative, claiming that “the public is more willing to accept pain and difficulty, more than they have ever been before.”

The Republican-controlled legislature in Texas has called on state agencies to reduce spending over the next biennial budget by 10 percent, after having already asked for a reduction of 5 percent earlier in the year. The earlier 5 percent cut eliminated \$73 million in spending on higher education, and state budget cuts have already led to 4,000 children being cut from a program subsidizing child care.

Democratic governors and legislators are also eager to demonstrate their enthusiasm for budget-cutting. In North Carolina, Democratic Governor Bev Perdue has reportedly asked state officials to develop plans for cuts ranging between 5 percent and 15 percent in order fill a projected \$3.5 billion deficit for next year. Public education would take a huge hit, with 5,300 public school teachers and 13,000 teacher’s assistants losing their jobs, along with 1,000 community college instructors. State parks employees would also see layoffs, with some state parks closed entirely, and others closed on some days of the week.

The state of Washington is projected to face a

shortfall of \$5.7 billion for 2011-2013. Having already imposed 6 percent across-the-board cuts, Democratic Governor Chris Gregoire recently proposed eliminating the Basic Health Program, a system of health insurance for the poor, at a savings of \$33.7 million. Education for K-4 would see state funding reductions of \$81.5 million, and a state food assistance program would be reduced by \$9.6 million.

Similar cuts are being made across the country. In a nation where the states fund the lion’s share of educational costs and social spending, the unprecedented budget crises and the sharp turn by the ruling elite to the right spells deep impoverishment for the population.



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