

Michigan workers demonstrate against budget cuts, emergency finance law

A WSWWS reporting team
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On Wednesday, about 5,000 workers and youth demonstrated in Lansing, the capital of Michigan, against budget cuts and a bill that would grant dictatorial powers to financial managers over cities and schools.

The Emergency Financial Manager (EFM) bill is expected to be signed into law today by Governor Rick Snyder. The law would invest unelected financial managers with dictatorial power over schools and cities, giving them the right to fire elected officials, tear up laws and collective bargaining agreements, and put in place deep social cuts. These and other measures can be implemented whenever the governor determines a local government is bound for financial crisis.

These crises will be provoked by Snyder's budget, which finances \$1.8 billion in tax cuts for corporations and the rich by attacking funding for education and social services and by imposing new taxes on the elderly and on workers. Like the anti-worker law recently put in place in Wisconsin and similar laws being advanced throughout the country, the intent of Michigan's EFM law is to create an authoritarian legal framework to impose wage and spending cuts.

The speakers' platform at the Lansing demonstration was dominated by Democrats and trade union officials. They attempted to portray the attacks on working class living standards as simply a Republican policy. In fact, at the national level it is being spearheaded by president Obama, and in many other states by Democratic governors. The template for financial managers has been established by Robert Bobb, the EFM for the Detroit Public Schools, appointed by former governor Jennifer Granholm, a Democrat, to shut down schools and slash spending in the city.

Out of perhaps 20 speakers, including the heads of several public sector unions, no perspective for fighting the attacks was offered. This is because the union officials in fact support the budget cuts and "sacrifices"—they only

wish to be given a role in carrying them out. This was best illustrated by the presence of United Auto Workers (UAW) head Bob King, the event's first speaker, who has been closely involved in slashing auto worker pay and benefits.

At a gathering of auto executives last year, King boasted that his paramount goal was ensuring the cost-competitiveness of US automakers. "The 21st-century UAW no longer views these managements as our adversaries or enemies," he declared. Such was the "opposition" to attacks on workers of the leaders of the event in Lansing. (see, "UAW's Bob King offers up auto workers as fodder for exploitation")

Among the several thousand teachers, nurses, autoworkers, and retirees who participated in the event, however, the opposition to budget-cutting was bitter and angry. Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to many of those in attendance.

Nancy Kerr-Mueller is a career development counselor who gives advice to students on jobs, student loans, and how to get scholarships. When the budget cuts take effect, there is a very real chance she could lose her job.

"I'm not part of a union, but I took an unpaid workday to come out here today. I let my son miss school to participate in the protest," she said.

"I work in a district with very poor families. Without me I don't know how students will be able to fill out the FAFSA [federal student loan application] and get funding for college. These things are very intimidating for students. For most kids financial aid is the only way they will be able to get an education. If I lose my job, someone else is supposed to take over who is already wearing way too many hats. "

Kathy Brosnan works as an after-school assistant in Canton, Michigan, and her friends Jennifer Stanton and Michelle Ford work in community outreach mental health

care in Ypsilanti, Michigan. All three fear that their jobs will be lost as a result of Governor Snyder's budget.

Jennifer and Michelle are most concerned for what the budget cuts will mean for mental health care in the state. "If our program gets closed down, all these people are going to wind up on the street," Michelle said.

Jennifer added, "We'll see an increase in homelessness, in hunger, in poverty. You can find money for tax cuts for the rich, but you can't find money for mental health, for poverty?"

The three said that they had supported Obama, but not anymore. "We've got to get rid of the false belief that the Democrats are going to help us," Michelle said. "All of us got tricked. They bailed out the banks, but where is the money for those in need?"

Kathy said that her boyfriend's father worked 40 years in the auto industry. As a result of Obama's overhaul of General Motors and Chrysler he has lost his retirement benefits. "Now when he needs a major medical service, he knows that he's going to have to pay \$6,000 or \$7,000 out of pocket up front," she said.

Kem Kutz is a retired GM autoworker from Saginaw, Michigan. He attended the demonstration with his wife, Dianne. They have lost their eye care and dental benefits as a result of the auto restructuring. "Each year his pension buys less," Dianne said, "and the executives are getting millions and millions just in bonuses."

The couple expressed bitterness toward the UAW, which forced the cuts on retirees. "We didn't have any say-so," Dianne said. "We were always told contracts were the law. But it seems like they're only good when the corporations want them."

Jo Brown is a housewife who brought her two young children to the demonstration.

"My granddaddy was a union man at Firestone Tire, and he had good health care and a decent retirement," she said. "I think the situation is appalling in this country. I lived for two years in Great Britain, and when I had been back in the states for two months I had already spent hundreds of dollars on health care."

"The Republicans are pushing the cuts harder," she continued. "But the Democrats aren't doing anything. We had all these hopes in Obama with all his talk about change, and then the first thing he did was come in and bail out the banks. Then he put all these troops in Afghanistan."

Four young workers who work with a group called Clean Water Action spoke with the WSWS. "It's not really about the Republicans and Democrats," Joe said,

"It's a worker issue. It's a class issue."

The four recent college graduates said that it is difficult for many of their friends to find jobs, especially in their chosen fields, and that the cost of college and the resulting student loan debt is crippling them.

"I know a lot of people who want to go back to college but can't because of the tuition costs," Mary said.

The WSWS also spoke to three linemen who work for DTE. One noted that CEOs now make an average of 375 times what the typical worker makes, "and it hasn't been like that since before the Great Depression," he said. "Pretty soon the middle class is going to be gone."

Another lineman quickly added, "There's going to be only two classes, the rich and the poor. There already is, the haves, and the have-nots."

A reporter discussed with the workers the work of the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS), which is fighting for utilities as a basic social right in Detroit and beyond. The men said they had heard of CAUS, and expressed sympathy for families in Detroit and elsewhere who are forced to live without heat and light.

Karen from Charlotte, Michigan, and Melissa, from Lansing, were there to demonstrate against the EFM law.

Melissa, a graduate student studying social inequality in the US, said that the bill is anti-democratic. "They want to be able to come and dictate government decision. It's not about party politics, it's about democracy."

Karen, a union member, said that she has been working for seven years for an \$8 billion corporation. "With this bill Snyder can come in and just take over any city or town he wants," she said.



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