

Michigan workers protest budget cuts

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More than five thousand workers protested Michigan Governor Rick Snyder's budget cuts outside the state capitol in Lansing on Wednesday. Teachers, city workers and other public employees were joined by auto, steel, building trades and other private-sector workers. Delegations traveled from Detroit, Flint, Saginaw, Grand Rapids and other cities.

Some 119 Detroit bus drivers, or most of the 187-member day shift, called in sick Wednesday to attend the protest, causing delays on most routes. Bus drivers, who are facing route cuts, staged the job action despite instructions by trade union officials that they report to work.

Governor Rick Snyder's budget, which he announced on February 17, would, among other things, tax the income retired workers receive from pensions and cut the earned income tax credit, worth as much as \$1,000 for 800,000 low-income workers.

Snyder said taxing pensions would raise \$900 million and cutting the tax credit would raise another \$360 million. These cuts are going to pay for the governor's proposed \$1.7 billion in tax cuts to businesses.

Snyder's proposals are part of a plan to shift the tax base dramatically from corporations to workers, in the name of "creating jobs." Snyder's new tax would subject both private and public-sector pensions to the state's tax rate of 4.35 percent. For a person receiving a \$15,000-per-year pension, that would amount to a tax increase of \$652 per year.

"Seventy-four percent of retirees in the state made less than \$20,000 per year and one third make under \$12,000 per year," said Mary Pollack, a representative of the Michigan State Employee Retirees Association, from the platform of the demonstration.

The cuts will hurt tens of thousands of retired auto workers across the state who have already been forced to accept the elimination of dental and optical care as a result of the Obama administration's restructuring of the

auto industry.

Snyder's budget proposal also imposes \$180 million in concessions on public workers. This would in large part come from a doubling of the portion of health insurance premiums paid by state workers, from 10 to 20 percent.

The budget also slashes \$500 million from K-12 education and reduces state aid to universities by 15 percent. It would also cut state aid to local government by \$100 million, including \$61 million from Detroit.

To ram through these attacks, Snyder and the Republican-controlled legislature have passed a law giving the governor the power to appoint Emergency Financial Managers to override decisions of elected bodies and tear up existing labor agreements.

The demonstrations were called by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the AFL-CIO, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), and other unions as part of a national day of action.

The speakers presented a program that was remarkably similar to the policies advanced in Wisconsin last month that ensured the passage of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's budget repair bill. Herb Sanders, an official from AFSCME Council 25, said, "We have stated time and time again that we are willing to make concessions to right the wrongs that the financial bigwigs and their Republican friends have done to the economy. But we refuse to relinquish on our right to collectively bargain."

In fact, by accepting the legitimacy of Snyder's concessions and budget-cutting demands—which are shared by the Democrats—the unions have abandoned any semblance of collective bargaining. As in Wisconsin, the trade unions in Michigan are solely concerned with defending their legal status to negotiate concessions and ability to collect union dues.

Sanders called on workers to "recall Republicans one

by one,” echoing the union-supported campaign to promote the Democrats in Wisconsin even though the Democrats on a national level and in state after state are imposing budget cuts and attacks on public employees just as savage as their Republican counterparts.

In order to coverup the unions’ capitulation to Snyder, the AFSCME official claimed the unions were prepared “to use our solidarity to shut this state down.” The suggestion that the unions might call strikes to oppose the governor’s attacks—something they have no intention of doing—won widespread support. Chants of “shut it down, shut it down” echoed through the crowd.

In an effort to promote the Democrats, the unions brought out Lansing Mayor Virg Bernero to speak, even though during his run for the Democratic nomination for governor last year he boasted how he took on city workers and forced them to take concessions.

Several workers spoke to the WWSWS about the issues at stake. Connie Lyles, a former administrative assistant from Lansing, said she thought that there should be a nationwide movement against budget cuts. She added that Democrats were just as responsible for the cuts as Republicans. “If we don’t break with the Democrats, we won’t achieve anything,” she said.

“The Democrats have not done a single thing for working people in thirty years,” she added. “If they’re doing what the people want, I don’t know who those people are.”

Lyles said she found out about the demonstration through Facebook, the social networking site. “I’ve been active online in the campaign against budget cuts.”

“My grandkids are in middle school,” she said. “What are they going to do when they get out of college?—If they even get to go to college. The rich want to turn us into a nation of slaves.”

She continued, “We live in a society that does not value the education of its children. And of course they are cutting the public schools and the teachers. It’s getting to the point where the only people whose kids will get a proper education are those who can afford to send their children to private school.”

Amber Devree came to the demonstration with other laid-off electricians from Grand Rapids. She said, “There is no work and hasn’t been any for two years. My dad said it hasn’t been this bad since the 1980s.

The only work electricians get is when there is bad storm and we’re needed to fix the damage. I hate to say it, but sometimes I pray for hurricanes because that’s the only way we can make a house payment and keep our lights on.”

Referring to Snyder’s budget-cutting, Amber continued, “We’re not going to have anything to live on when we retire. They’re cutting pensions and schools. Our middle school has no books, the kids copy lessons projected onto the wall.”

She added, “The bailout of the banks was a turning point. Everybody is finally seeing what is going on and starting to stick together.”

Dionte Dykes, a high school student from the Detroit area, said, “Obama is for the rich. If he was for us, we would not be in this mess. Instead, he is working with the Republicans to keep the rich rich and us poor. We are the working class, and we have to be on our own side because no one stands for us.

“Mayor David Bing was put in by the corporations to pass laws that would favor them. The Democrats are trying to break us down as much as the Republicans. They don’t think about the kids. They are closing our schools and leaving us no jobs except low-paying ones.”

“They’re bailing out Wall Street and the corporations aren’t paying taxes,” said Sarah Lawrence, the wife of an Electrician from Kalamazoo, Michigan. “They are cutting money from pensions and schools. The Democrats are aligned with the same corporations as the Republicans. This is the Corporate States of America.”



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