

Texas legislature approves “Texas-sized” attack on the working class

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“Everything’s bigger in Texas,” an old saying goes. A two-year budget tentatively approved May 29 in the Texas legislature, which slashes no less than \$15 billion from a total state budget of \$172 billion, surpasses in sheer size and callousness the austerity budgets of many other state governments.

Predicting the consequences of the Texas cuts is made difficult by their historic and unprecedented scope. One estimate by the Legislative Budget Board in March predicted that 335,000 jobs would be destroyed, including 146,000 private sector jobs and 189,000 government jobs.

The approved cuts will also cut off access for as many as 250,000 women to birth control and essential reproductive health care. The Planned Parenthood program, which provides these services to a wide layer of women in the state, will lose as much as two thirds of its funding. Religious fundamentalists in the legislature singled out Planned Parenthood.

The approved budget also includes major cuts to retired teachers’ health insurance, state health care programs, state environmental programs, and funding for state universities. Under the approved budget, as many as 43,000 fewer working class students in the state will receive financial aid for college. A significant number of nursing homes for seniors are also expected to be shuttered.

The passage of the budget failed on May 30, the last day of the official legislative session, as last-minute feuding broke out over the precise details of certain cuts. The legislature has now entered a special session in which the details will be hammered out. In a major step on Thursday, the Texas Senate Finance Committee voted to approve \$4 billion in cuts to education. Meanwhile, Republican Governor Rick Perry has requested that the legislature consider additional cuts to

state-funded health care programs.

The final wrangling over the budget within the state government has been accompanied by an increasingly provocative display of bravado before local media cameras, as Texas lawmakers congratulate themselves on their ability to carry out the most savage cuts of all the 50 states. “The Texas budget shows Washington and the other 49 states that it’s possible to make government live within its means without raising taxes,” declared Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst.

The announcement that the Texas budget had been approved drew praise from the national media and political figures around the country. The state is being held up as a model for “courageous” budget-cutting—another feather in the cap of the Texas political establishment, which is already infamous for record numbers of state executions, long traditions of bigotry, religious fundamentalism, and gangsterism, and association with such hated figures as George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Jeffrey Skilling, and T. Boone Pickens.

In a special session Friday, the Texas legislature debated the particulars of the \$4 billion in planned cuts to education, a nearly 6 percent decrease in funding. It recently emerged that this sum is likely illegal under a nearly three-decades-old Texas law that provides for a maximum class size of 22 students per teacher. A special session of the legislature had to be called to amend the 1984 law to permit the cuts.

Representative Rob Eissler denounced small class sizes as “one of the most expensive things we do.” The legislature also considered proposals Friday to streamline the procedure for firing teachers.

With gigantic cuts to education looming, local school administrations across the state over the past week have fired thousands of teachers and halted vital programs. In Bexar County alone, for example, which includes the

city of San Antonio, officials eliminated 2,459 jobs, or 5.4 percent of the total workforce. Some local districts were compelled to make even more dramatic cuts. Judson Independent School District cut 275 positions out of 3,054, or around 9 percent of the workforce.

The huge cuts to education are especially provocative in light of the fact that a state fund designed to compensate for any budget shortfalls in education contains more than enough cash to cover the cuts. The nearly \$9 billion Rainy Day Fund, which was created in the 1980s specifically to prevent cuts to education, will remain untouched under the current budget. On May 29, Governor Perry publicly congratulated the legislature on a decision not to spend a dime from the fund, even though he has dipped into the fund for his own pet projects in the past.

True to form, the Texas budget also features a maze of accounting gimmicks that are designed to conceal money and guarantee that further budget cuts will be necessary in the future. Nearly \$4.8 billion in expected growth in Medicaid costs appears to have been omitted entirely, which will likely result in future “emergency” cuts as the shortfall materializes.

The Democratic Party, which constitutes a minority in the Texas legislature, has attempted to posture as an opponent of the cuts. Democratic Representative Joaquin Castro recently characterized the plan as the “worst budget in a generation.”

Such protestations should fool no one. In states such as California, where the Republicans are the minority, the Democrats have directly presided over the imposition of historic cuts. Meanwhile, the Democratic administration of President Obama is contemplating huge cuts to federal programs that benefit the working class while it shuts off the meager trickle of federal aid money to state governments.

The approved Texas budget will sharply exacerbate social inequality and the daily hardships faced by the state’s increasingly destitute working class. One third of Texans already live below the federal poverty line for a family of four, a significantly higher percentage than in other regions of the country. Texas is also home to millions of undocumented immigrants, many of whom live in conditions of constant fear of discovery, extreme poverty, and dire exploitation without recourse to basic legal protections.

Meanwhile, the state is home to 44 billionaires with a

combined net worth of almost \$150 billion, or 10 times the approved cuts. These speculators, oilmen, and beef industry magnates pay state income and capital gains taxes of exactly zero percent. They also enjoy some of the lowest state corporate tax rates in the country.



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