

Illinois Democrats plan budgetary assault

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7 November 2011

In preparation for the beginning of their respective fiscal years, the city of Chicago and Cook County have unveiled budgets that impose layoffs, service cuts and regressive fee increases. As with the state of Illinois itself, the city and county are dominated by the Democratic Party, which is spearheading the attacks on working people.

The mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emanuel—Barack Obama’s former chief of staff—has politically led the assault, by being by far the most vocal proponent of austerity measures. Earlier this month, Emanuel released his budget preview, which includes the following:

- 363 layoffs at the Chicago Public Library (CPL), including librarians, library clerks, and pages with a consequent reduction in library hours;
- Layoffs of 108 workers and elimination of 80 vacancies at the Office of Emergency Management and Communications, including emergency dispatchers and downtown traffic control aides;
- Closure of six of the twelve of Chicago’s mental health clinics and a reduction in funding for the remaining facilities, forcing them to partner with other institutions;
- Elimination of 200 positions from the Department of Family and Support Services who work with domestic violence victims, the elderly, the homeless, and at-risk youth;
- Increase in Chicago hotel room tax from 3.5 to 4.5 percent;
- Additional parking fee of \$2 per day in downtown garages;
- Increase in the cost of water from \$2.01 per thousand gallons to \$3.82 per thousand gallons by 2015 and elimination of the current exemption from water utility fees for hospitals, schools, and nonprofits.

In Cook County, which includes Chicago, board

president Toni Preckwinkle released a budget blueprint on October 24. The cuts and fees included:

- 1,600 positions eliminated, with over 1,000 layoffs, many from the county health system;
- Increase of .25 percent in the sales tax on titled property, such as automobiles;
- A new tax imposed on the 100,000 unincorporated county residents to pay for county police services;
- Layoffs of custodians and privatization of custodial services;
- Layoffs at the public defender’s office, state attorney’s office, and highway department.

Both budgets plan health care cuts, which will have a disproportionate impact on the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the population. The Cook County Health and Hospital system would see its county subsidy reduced from \$276 million to \$252 million. Dr. Shari Schabowski, an emergency room doctor at Stroger Hospital told the *Chicago Sun-Times*, “To us, cutting the budget when we can’t even meet the need now is ludicrous. . . . We work at maximum capacity all the time. Our system is saturated with super-sick people, so regular medical care doesn’t happen.”

Emanuel’s cuts in mental clinics come as part of a 34 percent cut to the budget for the Department of Public Health. According to the budget, the patients and services from the six closed facilities would be transferred to the remaining six. This would undermine access and add expense to many of those relying on these services, and would likely mean that some serious mental health conditions would go untreated. The layoff of emergency dispatchers from the Office of Emergency Management and Communication will no doubt result in increased wait times for emergency responders, with potentially fatal outcomes.

Emanuel’s cuts to the city’s library system drew widespread anger, and librarians and their supporters

delivered a petition with 4,000 signatures opposing the plan to the mayor's office on October 31. Amounting to one-third of total CPL workers, the cuts would have eliminated 24 librarians, 112 clerks, and 146 pages. Instead the mayor reached a "compromise" to retain around 100 employees while reducing library hours by keeping branches closed until 12 PM on Mondays and Fridays. Caroline Boren, a librarian who spoke to the *Chicago Sun-Times* noted, "the staff will be so short, we will be spending all of our time just trying to keep books on the shelves, keep the computers running, keep the doors open."

Emanuel tried to present the proposal as the best decision he could have made, given the circumstances, saying he "was originally presented with the idea of closing eight-to-12 libraries" but "rejected that idea." As evidence of his claim, Emanuel cited the devastating budget cuts enacted by New York City's mayor Bloomberg:

"Do I expect controversy? Sure. But I also know that Mayor Bloomberg, who I have a lot of respect for—they closed libraries. You have to look at the context... The budget I will present will make the tough choices, and it will be honest with the people of Chicago about those tough choices to put our fiscal house in order."

This in fact is the program that Emanuel campaigned on and has worked to carry out since getting into office earlier this year. It differs in no way from the program of austerity being carried out nationally by the Obama administration and both big-business parties. In order to forestall popular opposition, on November 4 Emanuel announced \$10 million in minor changes, including restoring a mere \$3.3 million to the libraries. However, he reiterated his support for the cuts to 911 dispatchers and mental health clinics. The council is expected to support the budget overwhelmingly.

A report published October 27 by the *Chicago Reader*, which analyzed Emanuel's meetings based on a Freedom of Information Act request for his schedule, made clear that Emanuel's real constituency is the financial elite. Into his busy schedule, Emanuel—an investment banker before his move into the Obama White House—found ample time to meet with Bill Downe, CEO of the Bank of Montreal, Larry Fink, Chairman and CEO of BlackRock, Marc Lasry of Avenue Capital Group, Bruce Rauner of GTCR, Michael Sacks of Grosvenor Capital, and others.

Emanuel's campaign promise of "transparency" notwithstanding, the content of these discussions has not been made public.

Although he gave a large amount of time to bankers—whether or not they donated to his campaign—Emanuel also made time to meet with Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, former president Bill Clinton, and John Coli, President of Teamsters Joint Council 25, who served on Emanuel's inauguration team, and whose union contributed \$45,000 to his campaign.

As with Illinois Governor Pat Quinn, Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle has an undeserved reputation for being an independent and even progressive reformer. In reality, she is no such thing, having a long history in the type of sordid deal-making characteristic of Cook County Democratic politics. With this budget she takes responsibility for cuts that will have a dire impact on substantial numbers of people.

Like bourgeois politicians the world over, Emanuel, Preckwinkle, and the rest of the Democrats are carrying out the dictates of the financial aristocracy who demand the dismantling of social programs and the reduction of wages and living standards of the working class. In these attacks they rely upon the services of the trade unions and the petty-bourgeois left groups to impose their reactionary agenda.



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