

Michigan legislature enacts new attacks on workers, democratic rights

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The Michigan state legislature made a frenzied push in the “lame duck” session, sponsoring or supporting an unprecedented 282 bills in a period of three weeks. The barrage comes during the month before the new legislature takes office, with a much-reduced Republican majority.

While the outlawing of the union shop, making Michigan the 24th right-to-work state (See, “Michigan’s right-to-work law ”) was the most notorious of the measures, a whole number of fundamental attacks on democratic rights as well as tax cuts to business were enacted.

Underscoring the reactionary character of their actions, the House and Senate Republicans pushed through the bills with virtually no debate—on the last day they stayed in session for 18 hours—approving measures that can only be described as a Christmas wish-list for the extremely wealthy and politically reactionary.

Ultra-conservative billionaires Richard DeVos and Charles Koch were a major force behind the offensive, especially supporting the right-to-work legislation, but also backing new limits on the ability to obtain an abortion, a new Emergency Manager bill and the elimination of Michigan’s longest standing business tax, the Personal Property Tax (PPT).

As of Monday, Republican Governor Rick Snyder had signed 24 of the measures into law, while the others await a final review. Snyder vetoed only one bill, which would have legalized carrying concealed weapons in the public schools, passed one day before the massacre of school children in Newtown, Connecticut.

While Democrats verbally opposed many of the bills pushed through the lame-duck session, they have pushed equally reactionary measures in many areas,

including enacting emergency manager legislation under Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm (in office 2003-2010), which pioneered efforts to overturn local elected officials and impose state-appointed financial managers in cities and school districts.

Besides the right-to-work law, enacted by the legislature and signed by Snyder despite protests by thousands of workers in Lansing, other measures rushed into Michigan state law include the following:

* Emergency Manager

Michigan voters made their opposition known to the undemocratic practice of appointing state emergency managers to take over financially stricken cities and school districts and removing elected local officials. In the November election, a referendum vote repealed the previous Emergency Manager provision passed by the Republican-controlled legislature, Public Act 4.

However the Legislature immediately crafted a new law, the Local Financial Stability and Choice Act, to replace it. While the former law gave managers the ability to overturn existing union contracts, carry out massive cuts unilaterally and remove elected officials from any governing role, the new one offers similar measures: a consent agreement, mediation, an emergency manager or Chapter 9 bankruptcy.

* Abortion

A series of bills were passed making it more difficult to have an abortion. One bill makes it more difficult for abortion clinics to get licensing by making them adhere to the same standards as a freestanding clinic. This provision has nothing to do with providing better care, but is aimed at forcing the closure of clinics that can’t expand or increasing their cost of operation.

Another measure would proscribe a doctor from performing an abortion until it was determined that the woman was not coerced into the procedure. A

Michigan gynecologists group opposed this bill because it means doctors will be forced to recite a script and possibly report their findings to the state. “It puts the physician in the position of asking questions and being perceived as a part of law enforcement,” stated Dr. Matthew Allswede, a representative of the group told the *Detroit Free Press* .

* Personal Property Tax

Despite the name, there is nothing “personal” or individual about this tax. It is a tax on business property—both machinery and real estate—that has been in existence to fund public services in Michigan since 1893. The elimination of this tax is a huge windfall for state businesses. The \$590 million cost will be borne by already hard-hit schools and municipalities.

The impact of the tax cut is disproportionate throughout the state. Cities with large industrial bases will be devastated. For example, River Rouge, a working class city south of Detroit, receives 57 percent of its revenue from personal property taxes. The city of Auburn Hills, where Chrysler is headquartered, receives 22 percent of its revenues from personal property taxes. Detroit receives 16 percent of its taxes from PPT.

* Elections and Recalls

Both houses approved a bill making it more difficult to recall state legislators. The legislation was written in the interest of self-preservation by Republicans after passing the right-to-work law.

The new bill gives citizens a shortened period of 60 days to collect the required signatures, rather than the previous 90 days. The new bill says there must be an opponent running against the targeted official, not just a simple yes or no vote on the incumbent. The new bill also says recalls cannot be filed against state representatives, who serve two-year terms, during the first six months or the last six months of their term. For state senators and statewide elected officials, who serve four-year terms, recall petitions could not be filed during the first or last year of the term.

* Voting

The legislature passed a bill mandating that every voter would have to sign a statement declaring he or she is a US citizen before getting a ballot to vote. This bill is essentially another anti-immigrant bill heavily promoted by Republican Secretary of State Ruth Johnson.

An earlier version of the bill was vetoed by Snyder on technical grounds, in an effort to strike a less overtly anti-immigrant pose before the November election. The new law requires voters to sign an affirmation of citizenship and provide their address and date of birth before voting. A photo ID or a signed affidavit will be required to register to vote.

* Immigration

A bill dubbed the anti-Shariah law was passed in the Legislature without mentioning Islam or Islamic religious law by name. The bill bars the use of “foreign laws that impair constitutional rights.” The Council on American-Islamic Relations issued a statement criticizing it as an “anti-Islam bill” that was designed to create an atmosphere of fear.

* Blue Cross Blue Shield conversion

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, the largest insurer in the state, will be allowed to become a nonprofit mutual insurance company. The change in the legal status of the company after more than 70 years, ending its obligation to be the “insurer of last resort,” is expected to lead to higher rates. It was sought by company executives at least in part to position the company to take advantage of the Obama administration’s healthcare reform program.



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