State of Washington sends furlough warnings to 25,000 state workers

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Thousands of Washington state employees are waiting to see if they will be furloughed as of July 1 after state lawmakers sent out thousands of notices on Monday warning of an impending partial government shutdown. The legislators failed, through two special sessions, to agree to a budget. If no deal is reached by Sunday, June 30, 34 state agencies will be completely shut down, and dozens of others will be partially staffed. It is expected that over 25,000 state workers would be temporarily laid off.

Included in the agencies to be completely shuttered are services for the blind and the Workforce Training and Education Board. Partial shutdowns will affect numerous crucial departments, including many in Social Services.

TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) cash payments would continue, though in a June 17 document the DSHS (Department of Social and Health Services) states that it is looking into the legal requirements involved and how the program could be completely shut down, and that no new applications would be processed. Medicaid will continue until state withdrawal, and plans for totally "winding down" the program are already under consideration, according to the same release. If the plans are followed, thousands of recipients would be cut off within two months.

Funding for care of developmentally disabled people living with family members would be discontinued (approximately 62 percent of those who qualify for Community Residential Programs live at home). Under the current situation, places in state-run residential homes are already difficult to come by, and families caring for disabled relatives would be hard pressed to properly ensure the safety of the people for whom they're responsible.

Furthermore, legislators are proposing to shut down the Division of Disability Determinations, which assesses eligibility for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Non-Grant Medical Assistance (NGMA) after a federally required 180-day waiting period. This would mean no new claims or appeals would be processed. It is not clear what would happen for those whose eligibility was due for renewal.

The shutdowns and cut backs will set the stage for a social catastrophe. In addition to the above cuts, money for child-care subsidies, need-based student loans, mental health access and child protective services will be drastically slashed. Such programs as those monitoring juvenile offenders would be reduced to cover only the most severe cases, and rehabilitation services would be nearly eliminated. The office overseeing the investigation of elder abuse cases would be closed.

The state park system would also be totally shut down at the start of its busiest season, which would have tremendous impact on tourist-dependent areas and drive unemployment numbers back up.

By Wednesday, various state senators claimed a budget deal was "near," but that some "important issues" remained. None would articulate what, exactly, these issues are. Among the proposals that have been unveiled, however, is a Democratic Party proposal to spend $3.2 billion on state road projects. While the transit infrastructure surely does need improvement, the funds for this would come from a 10.5 cent-per-gallon gas tax increase, with the first part, a six cent rise, taking place on August 1. Hardest hit would be already-strapped working class and poor people, many of whom have long commutes to and from work, and those in rural areas.

The state is home to a number of Fortune 500

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companies, including Microsoft, whose president Bill Gates, with a personal net worth of 72.9 billion, is the richest person on the planet. Washington's projected 2013-2015 spending plan is for 33 billion. That just one individual holds more than twice as much wealth as is budgeted to run a state speaks to the level of inequality engendered by the capitalist system. Companies such as Microsoft, Amazon.com, Boeing and Starbucks, which are also headquartered in Washington, are granted massive tax breaks, amounting to millions, if not billions of dollars, while CEOs such as Gates, Jeff Bezos (23.2 billion) of Amazon, and Steve Ballmer (15.9 billion) and Paul Allen (15 billion) of Microsoft rake in massive personal profits.

Meanwhile, the infrastructure of the state literally crumbles, and the poor and vulnerable are subjected to the whims of a legislature that prioritizes the desires of the wealthy over the needs of society at large. In all the talk of "winding down" TANF, Medicaid, and slashing funds for disabled people and their caregivers, there is not a peep about raising taxes on the elite. In fact, this is resisted by both big-business parties. Rather, proposals are put forth such as the rise in gas tax that will hit the wallets of the working class—already burdened by the massive losses sustained in the aftermath of the 2008 crash and immune to the effects of the stock market recovery that so richly rewards the billionaires.

The only way forward to prevent the further erosion of society and reverse the growing poverty of masses of people is for the working class is to expropriate the massive cash hoards of these individuals and the holdings of Microsoft, Amazon, Boeing and the rest of the corporations which have for so long benefited from the largess of compliant legislatures and use these assets for the advancement of society as a whole.

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