Nearly one in five hit by food stamp cuts in Michigan

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It will be a cruel Thanksgiving and Christmas for many in the US as the abrupt reduction in monthly food assistance allotments kicks in just as the holiday months get underway. Michigan is one of several populous states including New York, California and Florida, where large numbers of recipients on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly known as food stamps, are affected. Nearly one in five in Michigan, the 1.8 million people are currently on food assistance, will see a substantial cut in their food stamp benefit this month.

This is the result of across the board cuts in the federally funded nutrition assistance for low-income households. The cuts roll out over the next month in all 50 states, Washington D.C., Puerto Rico and the US territories, hitting families as their SNAP benefits come up for monthly renewal. Because food stamps are awarded to families with income under 130 percent of the poverty level, growing inequality and the effects of the recession have increased the rolls by 70 percent since 2007.

It is the first such blanket cut in food stamp allotment levels since the program was established nationwide in its present form in the early 1960's. The reduction in monthly allotments resulted from the elimination of a supplement to food assistance authorized four years ago under the American Recovery and Reconstruction Act of 2009 (ARRA.)

Forty three percent of Michigan residents who will see the reduction are children, and 26 percent are elderly or disabled. The average grant in Michigan was about $135 a month. The maximum for an individual is $186, but few qualify for that amount. The minimum monthly grant for elderly who fall under the 130 percent of poverty level qualifying income cut off is $16.

With the cuts, food benefits will average less than $1.40 per person per meal in 2014. Most who get the aid could not make it up even if jobs were available. Nevertheless food pantries estimate that the current grant level only feeds a family for no more than three weeks out of every month.

As a whole the aggregate hit from the recent SNAP reductions to Michigan families will be $183 million over the year, according to a recent report by the Michigan League for Public Policy (MLPP), a liberal think tank in the state's capital.

The Michigan State Legislature has passed a raft of anti-worker legislation in the past few years, including reinstating asset limits that prevent many newly unemployed and elderly from collecting food stamps. Michigan Governor Rick Snyder signed other cruel cuts to social programs into law in 2011. Michigan became the first state to reduce unemployment benefits from 26 to 20 weeks. Laws to strictly enforce time limits for cash welfare, first imposed by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm in 2007, were also implemented, slashing welfare cases from 80,000 down to 43,000.

These huge cuts in state assistance programs have been implemented under conditions where unemployment remains over nine percent with food banks and pantries in Southeast Michigan struggling to provide assistance. Currently 424,000 people in Michigan are unemployed, and many more are underemployed. More than 40 percent of unemployed workers today have been out of work for more than six months.

The World Socialist Web Site spoke to Melba, who works at the Bryant Community Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan about their twice-monthly food distributions and emergency food pantry.

She told the WSWS: "After two and a half hours it's

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gone. We're seeing a bigger influx now because of food stamps being cut, and cuts to welfare. It is something to see when the truck pulls up and unloads its tonnage. At a quarter to five in the morning people are already lining up outside. We used to let everyone in but we violated our capacity and the fire marshal came and threatened to shut us down if it happened again. Now people have to wait outside. We let in four at a time, except for a 90-year-old lady who we let in because she can't wait outside. We see everyone from 18-year-olds to 90-year-olds.

"We are always running out of food. It comes in, and goes right back out. We serve 1,800 people a month. We're not filling the total need completely, but to the best of our ability. We had to limit meat portions yesterday because they just didn't have it. We get it from Food Gatherers, but they're getting less because their donations and grants are down."

Michigan Senator Debbie Stabenow, in her capacity as head of the Senate Agriculture Committee, is now trying to shepherd a bill through Congress cutting a further $4 billion from food stamps over the next ten years.

Stabenow, now in her third term, has had the enthusiastic backing of the trade unions throughout her long career in state and federal politics. The cut she is proposing affects the "heat and eat" program that coordinates SNAP with utility assistance in 16 northern US states.

Under the House Bill, which cuts a staggering $40 billion over ten years, twice that amount would be cut from "heat and eat." The Food Research and Action Coalition (FRAC) estimates that 850,000 families will lose $90 a month in food stamps from this version of the cut.

The House bill will eliminate benefits altogether for 200,000 Michigan adults who are jobless and do not have children at home.

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