Michigan legislation would cut off welfare for families with truant children

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The Michigan legislature is currently reviewing a bill that would cut off cash assistance to families with children who have poor school attendance.

In a 74-36 vote in March, the Michigan State Assembly passed HB 4014, which would remove welfare payments (known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, TANF) from families where a child is chronically truant according to school district rules. The bill was reviewed by a State Senate panel on May 6 and is currently pending before that body.

The proposed cuts will have a devastating impact on families receiving the miserly cash allotment from the state, making it impossible to pay bills such as rent, water and heat. Cutoff from this assistance will impose a particular hardship given the resumption of mass water shutoffs by the city of Detroit, where approximately 27,000 families receive welfare assistance.

President and CEO of the Michigan League for Public Policy, Gilda Jacobs, said the punitive policy would only worsen conditions for these families. “All kids should be in school, but there are lots of reasons that kids may end up truant,” she said. “By punishing the entire family, it will push families into deeper poverty.”

Republican state Rep. Al Pscholka, who sponsored the bill and also wrote the initiative for the reactionary emergency manager law in Michigan, said it is a “last resort for individuals who refuse to cooperate with DHS,” and that it is only now putting into law what has already been a policy used by Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services since 2012. Since then, approximately 350 families have been cut off from assistance, which averages only $386 per month per family.

In Michigan, a student must have 10 or more unexcused absences per school year to be considered truant. According to the Michigan Department of Education, there were 93,408 cases of truancy in the 2011-2012 school year.

Reasons for truancy vary, but they are most often related to social distress. Transportation is often a factor when considering school absences. This is true particularly where students rely on their guardians to get to and from school, and especially in the case of students transferred to schools farther and farther from their homes due to school closings. In Detroit, for example, hundreds of neighborhood schools have been closed over the past decade.

The cynical claim made by politicians such as Michigan Governor Rick Snyder and Pscholka is that cutting families off from social services will somehow improve the education of children, and thereby address poverty. DHS spokesman Dave Akerly called the bill a “carrot and a stick” in an interview with the *Detroit News*. “The intent is, this is cash assistance for people with kids and you need to be responsible,” he said.

Such claims are being made, however, by political forces who are responsible for the wholesale attack on public education. Detroit in particular has been a center of the privatization of public schools, with the highest percentage of charter schools anywhere outside of New Orleans, Louisiana, where the entire education system was restructured after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The threat to remove cash assistance from families with truant children corresponds cruelly to the withdrawal of funding and shutdown of “underperforming” public schools. In both cases, the solution to rectify conditions exacerbated by poverty is punishment through the elimination of financial assistance.

“It is difficult to see how cutting financial support for

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basic needs to our most impoverished families will improve the chances that their children will attend school," wrote Jane Zehnder-Merrell, project director for Kids Count in Michigan, in a column on the Michigan League for Human Services web site.

The Michigan law on truancy is part of a raft of vicious measures being adopted to criminalize the poorest layers of society. In Kansas, the state has adopted a policy limiting welfare recipients to $25 a day in cash withdrawals from ATM machines. As a result, recipients will be required to pay as much as 20 percent of their aid on ATM and state fees. The measure was enacted as part of a bill that also bans welfare recipients from spending their state aid on such things as massage parlors and swimming pools.

This attack on TANF is part of an assault on the working class as a whole. In Michigan, the emergency manager law written by Pscholka has been used by Democrats and Republicans in cities throughout the state to impose drastic cuts in social services, dismantle public education and enforce wage cuts and layoffs.

Detroit, the state's largest city, just completed bankruptcy proceedings, overseen by an emergency manager, which have been used to restructure the entire city in the interests of the rich. As politicians conspire to slash meager welfare payments from the most impoverished sections of the population, Detroit-area billionaires like Mike Illitch and Dan Gilbert have been handed hundreds of millions in tax abatements and development loans.

The dismantling of welfare programs in 1996 begun under the Clinton administration has been continued under all subsequent administrations, both Democrat and Republican. The cash assistance portion of TANF nationwide fell to $9.6 billion in 1996, down from $20.4 billion in what were mostly cash benefits in 1996, according to CLASP, a low-income advocacy group. The average number of recipients per month was cut from 12.6 million to 4.6 million.

In 2011, Michigan's Earned Income Tax Credit (partially funded by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF] program) was cut by two thirds, which raised state income taxes for several hundred thousand low-income working families.

The attack on what remains of the public education and welfare system in Michigan, especially in Detroit, is a bipartisan policy. The Detroit bankruptcy, which has plunged city residents deeper into poverty and robbed city services, has had the full support of the Obama administration. In 2012, the child poverty rate in Detroit was 59 percent, up from 44.3 percent in 2006.

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