Michigan cuts welfare payments for school truancy

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Michigan's Republican Governor Rick Snyder approved a "parental responsibility bill" on June 10 that cuts families off of welfare if their child is truant from school. The law is one of a raft of vindictive measures throughout the country, which blames the poor for the social ills caused by poverty in order to strip them of government assistance.

Sponsored by Republican State Representative Al Pscholka, House Bill 4041 codifies a policy of the state's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) that has been in existence for several years. Families will lose eligibility for cash assistance if a child, aged six through 15, does not meet state attendance requirements. Truancy is defined as 10 or more unexcused absences from school.

Benefits can only be reinstated if the student meets the quota of 21 days of regular attendance. Children 16 or older who are still dependents and have not graduated from high school will also lose assistance if they are deemed truant.

The right-wing advocates of this policy cynically claim the threat of destitution will lead to improved school attendance. In fact, studies show students from low-income families are already six times more likely to drop out of high school. Cutting cash assistance will only worsen these problems guaranteeing that far more children will leave school.

While state Democrats opposed the bill, both parties have overseen budget cuts targeting low-income families. From the Obama administration down to city officials in Detroit and other Michigan cities, the Democrats have joined the Republicans in slashing funding for food stamps, low-income heating assistance, public education and other vital services. The Democrats have also collaborated in the installation of emergency managers in Detroit and other cities with dictatorial powers to slash budgets in order to ensure debt payments to Wall Street.

After decades of deindustrialization, mass layoffs in the auto industry and wage cuts imposed with the assistance of the unions, Michigan, which once had among the highest living standards for workers in the country, now ranks in the bottom 10 for per-capita income in the US, barely ahead of Mississippi, West Virginia, Alabama, Arkansas and other traditionally poor states.

Poverty is one of the chief factors determining a student's rate of attendance in the state. According statistics compiled by *Bridge Magazine*, in the 2011-12 school year alone, "the truancy rates for two financially troubled districts on the east and west side of the state [of Michigan] were the highest in the state. More than half of the students in Highland Park and Muskegon Heights schools, both operating under state-appointed emergency managers, missed at least two weeks of school without excuses (57 percent in Highland Park, 55 percent in Muskegon)."

The state's own Board of Education released a statement declaring their concern for the enforcement of the bill. "From the perspective of the Michigan State Board of Education, House Bill 4041 is unnecessarily harsh on children who are living in extreme poverty and have no control over their economic status. These children have very few resources and already face a greater likelihood to face a number of challenges, including mental health difficulties, chronic illnesses such as asthma, living with adult caregivers with inconsistent work schedules and lack of access to reliable transportation—some of the main barriers to regular school attendance."

The statement continued to note that over half a million children in Michigan live in poverty, and urged a veto of the bill before it was passed to avoid pushing these families deeper into the economic abyss.

A 2013 report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics examined the spending habits of individuals receiving Social Security, cash assistance, SNAP (food stamp) benefits and other government benefits, compared to families that receive none. Like most families in the US, those on government assistance spend the majority of their income on food and housing, however, they spend a larger portion on basic necessities. The elimination of what few benefits remain threatens families with starvation and homelessness.

When it comes to people living perilously close to the edge of financial disaster, the official response is to loot pensions, slash welfare and shut off water. At the same time, both big business parties have no problem showering tax breaks and other incentives on the corporate and financial elite. Michigan's largest city, Detroit, has undergone a bankruptcy restructuring that has entirely benefited the most affluent layers of the population.

Real estate developer and billionaire Dan Gilbert received almost $50 million in tax breaks from the state of Michigan in 2010 to move his Quicken Loans headquarters to Detroit, while in 2011 the state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which benefits low-income families, was slashed by 70 percent.

Mike Ilitch, the owner of Little Caesar's Pizza and the Detroit Red Wings hockey franchise, is receiving hundreds of millions in state aid for a new downtown sports complex. The city sold 39 parcels of land to the Detroit Downtown Development Authority for just one dollar in 2014 in one of the largest "land transfers" ever seen by the city. The land will be rented for 95 years to Olympia Development of Michigan, owned by the Ilitch dynasty. Meanwhile Detroit retiree pensions were cut $5.5 billion in last year's bankruptcy proceedings.

As for the auto industry, General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler have made a combined $73 billion in North American profits since 2011, largely by exploiting the economic desperation in cities like Detroit, reducing new workers to near poverty wages.

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