

Illinois legislators continue assault on public higher education

George Marlowe
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With Illinois now in its eighth month without a state budget, it has become increasingly clear that the ruling class in Illinois has decided to place higher education spending on the chopping block.

As Democrats and Republicans continue to work behind the scenes to come to a deal on massive cuts to pensions and social programs, multiple state universities and community colleges are being starved of significant financial resources with some warning that they will run out of money before the end of the current academic term.

A number of essential state programs and grants have been held hostage in this coordinated and bipartisan assault. Although a large portion of state spending has continued since July 1 due to a patchwork of court orders and decrees, there has been a complete suspension of funding to higher education.

In the course of the deadlock, 12 public universities and 48 community colleges have not received any of their allotted state appropriations for this school year, which amounts to more than 30 percent of funding at some of the schools. In addition, students have not received any of their need-based Monetary Award Program (MAP) grants, which, besides making it impossible for some of these students to attend classes, has placed added budgetary pressure on public and private institutions in the state.

Republican governor Bruce Rauner's original proposed budget included a 31 percent cut to higher education, while the budget that the Democrats sent back to him, and which he vetoed, included a 6.8 percent cut. Whatever the precise figure turns out to be, it will be significant, and a likely result will be a permanent reduction in the number of institutions and students that are supported by state funding.

Many of these institutions had already made significant cuts to their budgets in anticipation of further cuts in state funding. In addition to declining enrollment—more than

17.8 percent since 2009—higher education institutions in Illinois have lost funding for multiple years since the 2008 financial crisis, and have had to raise tuition to compensate for the lost revenue. According to a report by Young Invincibles, the state of Illinois has slashed higher education funding by more than half a billion dollars in the last six years alone, under both Democratic and Republican governors.

Institutions that serve working class and lower middle class families have already been significantly impacted. A number of schools, including Western Illinois University, Eastern Illinois University, Governors State University, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago State University (CSU), and Kishwaukee Community College, are facing dire circumstances and potential closures. Schools such as the University of Illinois and Illinois State University are expected to have a slightly easier time filling in budget shortfalls by relying on their larger endowments, although both are also implementing cuts.

With no money coming in and funding uncertainty ahead, CSU has sent notices saying that they will be unable to pay their employees as early as March and could shut down entirely. The school, located in Chicago's South Side, serves over 4,800 students, the bulk of whom are low-income and working class. More than 30 percent of the school's funding comes from state appropriations.

Thomas Wogan, a spokesperson for CSU has said, "This is a crisis by every definition of the word crisis." As March comes around, the university will not be able to pay its \$5 million in payroll costs for its faculty and employees. More than 800 employees could be laid off and student services are likely to be cut.

Faculty at CSU are being told to expect to work without pay so students can finish the semester. The administration is currently working on emergency plans such as financial exigency as well as attempting to

completely retool labor contracts.

Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU), another predominately working-class commuter school, has also been significantly affected by looming cuts. The university president Sharon Hahs told the *Chicago Tribune*, that even as they may be able to complete the semester with reserve funding, “there is the potential for the university to shut down” if there is insufficient state appropriations.

Thirty faculty at Western Illinois University were laid off late January, which comes after six non-teaching staff were laid off last year. Western Illinois, which gets about 21 percent of its \$245 million budget from the state, has had to end sports programs and reduce other positions to ten months instead of twelve due to the budget impasse.

Kishwaukee Community College has, like many schools, frozen spending and started cost cutting in various ways. The college has placed a moratorium on all out-of-state travel and has reduced the budget for on-campus student jobs. Department budgets have been slashed by \$200,000.

Eastern Illinois University just sent layoff notices to an estimated 200 non-instructional employees. The university will also furlough all administrators and professional staff for the month of March. More layoffs, department cuts and budget cuts are likely expected at many more universities.

In a letter obtained by the *Tribune*, multiple university presidents have sent letters to the state, saying, “When colleges and universities reach this point of no return — when bills cannot be paid and payroll cannot be met — they will close. The results will be catastrophic for the economy of the State of Illinois and it will shatter the dreams and lives of hundreds of thousands of Illinois students and families.”

The Democrats in the General Assembly have cynically passed a bill that would fund MAP grants at universities and community colleges for \$725 million, without addressing funding questions for public universities. MAP grants are critical for community colleges to open doors to low-income students. On average, students receive about \$2,782 a year.

Rauner has threatened to veto the bill, which Republicans characterize as an empty gesture. According to Rauner, the Democrats’ budget will create a “cash flow” problem that might impact social services (which are already under attack under his plans). This essentially means that the state is using the higher education budget to make up for the several billion dollar deficit in the state

budget.

Meanwhile Rauner and the Republicans have proposed an alternative bill that would only fund universities and community colleges at significantly reduced levels, with the caveat that Rauner be given full control over how budget cuts are made and be given the power to shift money around as he sees fit.

Additionally, the Rauner camp has demanded that concessions on funding be made only if Democrats accept Rauner’s so-called “Turnaround Agenda,” which includes structural “reforms” on spending at colleges and universities, particularly as it relates to collective bargaining agreements and cuts to workers’ compensation.

Despite the public wrangling and disagreements, the Democrats and Republicans agree that higher education for working class youth is largely expendable. That working class youth deserve a high quality and affordable education is seen as unnecessary by both parties in their bipartisan assault on public education. The ruling class and their political representatives are seeking to claw back all gains made in the past by workers and put the brunt of the economic crisis onto their backs.

Pseudo-left organizations such as the International Socialist Organization have, instead, been seeking by means of protests to put pressure on the very capitalist state that has no intent of relenting in its assault on the living standards of workers and youth. They have called for empty demands such as for the state of Illinois to raise taxes on the wealthy. The end result of their call for action is to channel social discontent behind the already discredited trade unions and the Democratic Party.

The Democrats, however, fully knew that colleges and universities would bear the brunt of the budget crisis, as funding for vital programs hemorrhages across the board. Despite supporting an austerity budget, the Democrats’ biggest fear is the eruption of a social explosion if Rauner’s policies are implemented in one fell swoop. Rauner, for his part, is a fervent opponent of public education, as has been shown with his support for charter schools, privatization efforts, and calls to attack Chicago Public School teachers’ living standards even further.



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