

Illinois legislature agrees to fund higher education at 30 percent of last year's level

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As Illinois' budget impasse prepares to enter its 11th month, the Illinois House and Senate agreed on Friday to what has been widely referred to as an "emergency" or "stopgap" funding measure for higher education. Workers should be warned, however, that the Democrats and Republicans are working closely together to hammer out the framework of an agreement on deep budget cuts that would result in continued layoffs in higher education and social services, to say nothing of the deep suffering those cuts would inflict on the state's most vulnerable residents.

Anger at the ruling elite for their failure to fund higher education and social service has been mounting as individual schools continue to report on layoffs and cuts, and as the state's social service providers close their doors and cut off desperately needed life-lines to the disabled, elderly and homeless. These institutions have so far received nothing from the state in the way of funding, even as the rest of state government has up to this point continued receiving funding at the same rate as the previous year due to a variety of court order and consent decrees.

The bill, which provides funding for state universities and community colleges at about 30 percent of the previous year's levels, may well be the only funding that these institutions end up receiving. The current plan calls for the state's public universities to share \$356 million, which would provide most of them with 31 percent of their funding based on last year's budget level. Chicago State University, which had warned it could close down at the end of the semester, would receive 60 percent. Community colleges would receive \$74.1 million, or about 27 percent of their expected budget.

Grants provided through the Monetary Award Program would receive \$167.7 million, about one

semester's worth of funding. MAP grants are awarded to low-income students in Illinois at either public or private colleges and universities. Many institutions who concentrate on educating working class and first-generation students were hit heavily by the lack of MAP grant funding. Some even announced they would begin requiring students to pay back the grants they were awarded if the state funding never materialized.

Even with the funding, it is likely that few of the already announced cuts will be reversed. Many institutions have already indicated that they will continue with planned layoffs.

After the passage of the measures by near unanimous majorities, Illinois Democratic House Speaker Michael Madigan took the opportunity to make a grand show of criticizing Republican Governor Bruce Rauner, who has made passage of a state budget contingent on the passage of his "Turnaround Agenda," a collection of anti-worker measures long sought by the most rapacious elements of the financial aristocracy. Claiming to be pushing for a "more comprehensive budget and full fiscal year funding" that is "not contingent on passage of [Rauner's] demands that will destroy the middle class," Madigan is in actuality working towards the framework of a plan that will allow Democrats and Republicans to agree to a compromise between their proposals for austerity.

An important component of this plan is likely to be a move in the near future by Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan, Michael Madigan's daughter, to end the current court-mandated payments to state workers. On March 24, the Illinois Supreme Court rejected a lawsuit brought by AFSCME Council 31, the local representing a large portion of state workers, which had sued over promised pay raises from 2011 that were withheld because the state claimed it did not have the money. In

its decision, the court said that it was “a well-defined and dominant public policy under which multiyear collective bargaining agreements are subject to the appropriation power of the State, a power which may only be exercised by the General Assembly.”

Those court decisions, which had been supported by Rauner and his appointee and ally, Comptroller Leslie Munger, have allowed large portions of state government to continue operating. It is expected that the attorney general will attempt to apply the Supreme Court decision to the current standing court rulings by the Illinois 1st District Appellate Court and a St. Clair County court that have kept paychecks flowing to workers.

In other words, the Democratic Party is moving to end the paychecks of thousands of state workers in what would amount to a shutdown of state government. This has been widely hailed as a means to force Rauner into a compromise as a response to public outcry and anger. It is, however, nothing of the sort. Such a move would actually be a prelude to massive concessions and cuts as the unions would then be free to call any kind of deal a “victory” in the same way that they have attempted to characterize all recent defeats for workers.

In such a situation, the outstanding money for higher education is a likely target for elimination, since those institutions have by and large managed to keep themselves alive by shedding workers and cutting programs.



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