

Governor Scott Walker attacks Wisconsin's working poor

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Wisconsin Republican Governor Scott Walker has begun a statewide tour with the former Governor Tommy Thompson to promote a so-called welfare reform measure, which is included in Walker's 2017-2019 state budget proposal. The governor titled his new program Wisconsin Works for Everyone, and has pushed the usual and customary right-wing buttons to demean and slander the working class and the poor. At a Milwaukee news conference, Walker said, "We fundamentally believe that public assistance should be a trampoline not a hammock."

To receive and keep access to Wisconsin's FoodShare program, commonly known as food stamps, Walker proposes that parents with children either look for work five days a week, obtain job training, or show proof of employment for 80 hours a month. He proposes low-income and poor heads of household be given three months to comply or be cut off of benefits entirely or lose the allotment of food relief proportional to their "noncompliance."

David Lee, executive director of Feeding Wisconsin, which advocates for the state's food pantries, told the *Wisconsin State Journal* January 24, "The proposed sanction will reduce the overall amount of food available for everyone in the family, including children." Lee pointed out that over 60 percent of FoodShare recipients are families with children. FoodShare is Wisconsin's distributing agency for the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP).

A lobbyist for the Wisconsin Manufacturing and Commerce association, Scott Manley, issued a statement in response to Walker's proposals, saying, "One of the biggest problems we routinely hear from our members is that the welfare system in our state and country creates a disincentive to work." In other words, corporate interests want to create an even larger pool of desperately impoverished workers to drive down wages and conditions even further.

Walker campaigned for slashing access to food relief for childless couples and individuals in 2014 and achieved passage of state legislation in April, 2015 requiring persons

without children to show proof of working 80 hours a month or attending work training programs. According to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, since April, 2015 some 64,000 FoodShare recipients lost food stamps after three months of not getting a job. Approximately 21,000 Wisconsin persons using FoodShare have obtained a job averaging \$12 an hour in a 33-hour work week.

The Department of Health Services states at its website, "Each month people across Wisconsin get help from FoodShare. They are people of all ages who have a job but have low incomes, or are living on small or fixed incomes, or have lost their job, or are retired, or are disabled and not able to work."

A *Wisconsin State Journal* report from December 2015 stated that almost 15,000 people lost food stamp relief from July to September that year.

Thompson, traveling with Walker in the current "welfare reform" campaign, founded the Wisconsin Works, or W2, in 1997 during Democratic President Bill Clinton's presidency when he (Clinton) collaborated with both Republicans and Democrats to "end welfare as we know it." During this period, Clinton and Thompson campaigned for and acquired funding for the most dramatic explosion of prison building and incarceration of youth and working people in US history.

The federal SNAP food stamp program comprises one of the most important safety nets in the United States, upon which some 47 million persons rely to survive. Average SNAP benefits were a meager \$126.83 per person in 2015. In Milwaukee County, an average of 248,151 people received FoodShare relief in 2016. Current federal law forbids states from requiring parents of in-home children to seek employment to receive food relief.

About half of the state's FoodShare childless recipients live in Milwaukee County, only seven percent of whom, since the law requiring proof of work to obtain food relief went into effect, have found work.

Walker's new law would require congressional approval, or a "decree" waiver from President Trump, and Wisconsin

legislative approval. The proposal would also require persons earning 200 percent of the federal poverty level to fund childcare up to \$1 for every \$3 dollars earned. The governor also proposes to impose proof-of-work requirements on persons receiving federal housing assistance.

Sherrie Tussler, executive direct of Hunger Task Force in Milwaukee, told the AP Wire Service's Theo Keith last month that, despite Walker's "assurances" that only the parent not finding a job would be cut off from food relief, "Families eat together, and so, if you minimize the amount of money available to purchase food, all that means is you're going to increase hunger."

Walker sent then-President Elect Trump a public letter in December asking the incoming president—whom Walker ran against in the Republican primaries—to issue a waiver for the federal restriction on drug testing of SNAP recipients. At the time of passage of the April, 2015 legislation requiring childless food stamp recipients to show proof of employment, Walker demanded the right to drug test food stamp recipients and filed suit against the US Department of Agriculture in the District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin. Walker's proposed drug testing of the working poor for access to food and hunger relief formed a noisy part of his presidential campaign begun in 2015. Federal Judge Charles Clevert rejected the request in a ruling September 28 last year.

In his December letter to Trump, Walker also stated that he was opposed to Syrian refugees being allowed to resettle in Wisconsin, and requested that the state be allowed to impose higher premiums and copays for the working poor using Medicaid healthcare, which would impact at least 143,000 childless adults making less than \$11,880 a year.

Almost a dozen states require drug testing to receive cash assistance from the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program (TANF), which serves a far smaller population of the poor and allows states to set some eligibility rules.

In April last year, Republican governors from Wisconsin, Arizona, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas and Utah coauthored a letter to Republican congressional members demanding lawmakers write drug testing of SNAP recipients into federal law. All of them, including Gov. Walker, trumpeted "states' rights" prerogatives in their attacks on working people. A congressional effort to include drug testing in appropriations for SNAP failed passage in 2013.

Governor Rick Scott of Florida did not sign the governors' appeal for drug testing of food stamp recipients, having failed in an effort to drug test a TANF beneficiary and single father college student at the University of Central Florida in

2011. Luis Lebron, a military veteran and accounting degree candidate, refused a drug test requirement that the Florida legislature had approved earlier that year. Lebron was subsequently denied nutritional assistance and with the ACLU filed suit against the state and won his case to decline drug testing as a condition for TANF assistance.

In June of last year, the notorious ravings of Gov. Paul LePage grabbed headlines when he demanded that the US Department of Agriculture stop the SNAP program food relief for the state of Maine, because, he claimed, recipients were buying candy and soda drinks with food stamps. The governor was filmed ranting about the drug-using habits by "people of color," and a state legislator posted a voice mail message on the Internet from the governor threatening him for calling LePage a racist. Last year, 195,259 working people, children and elderly, or one in seven of the population of Maine, used food stamps. The USDA lists Maine as the slowest state to distribute food relief.

Last February, US Representative Robert Aderholt (R-Alabama) introduced legislation that would require food stamp recipients to urinate in a cup to obtain access to hunger relief. Governor Walker said at the time, "The legislation authored by Congressman Robert Aderholt confirms states' rights to drug test SNAP recipients, and we look forward to working with him on this crucial issue and implementing common-sense reform in Wisconsin."

According to *Salon*, on December 20 the rate of drug use in the US stands at 9.4 percent of the population. Welfare recipient testing has yielded positives from 0.002 to 8.3 percent in the dozen states requiring persons seeking survival relief to give urine samples. In all but one state, the findings stood at below one percent. In the state of Michigan, in a yearlong testing of welfare recipients, drug testing yielded ONE positive!

In the midst of this historically foul and degraded social and political climate, eleven of America's obscenely rich 540 billionaires list their principle residences in Wisconsin. The state's eleven richest possess a combined net worth of \$37.8 billion. The net worth of all US billionaires for 2016, according to Forbes, is \$2.4 trillion.



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