

Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer makes a pro-business appeal for bipartisan unity in her 2023 State of the State address

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On Wednesday, January 25, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer delivered the 2023 State of the State address from the Capitol building in Lansing. It was the first time since 2020, just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the state, that a live audience was in attendance.

It was also the first time since 1983 that a Democratic governor delivered the State of the State address under conditions where the Democratic Party held a majority in both chambers of the Michigan legislature.

The words “COVID-19” and “pandemic” were mentioned zero times in the address. The state of Michigan has had 3.02 million cases and over 41,000 deaths—both likely undercounts following the abandonment of any measures to contain or seriously track the virus—since the first cases were confirmed in March 2020. Whitmer herself tested positive for the virus in August 2022.

In 2020, Whitmer was targeted by fascists to be kidnapped and killed due to the limited COVID containment measures put in place by her administration. The far-right militia members were egged on by fascistic members of the Republican Party and then-President Donald Trump, who tweeted for his supporters to “LIBERATE MICHIGAN!” The kidnapping plot, exposed by federal and state authorities in October of 2020, was a dress rehearsal for the January 6, 2021 fascist assault on the US Capitol.

Aside from an oblique reference to “historic challenges” and the “visceral consequences of political division,” the State of the State address did not deal with any of this, despite the fact that two of the Michigan plotters were convicted and sentenced less than a month ago for their roles in the scheme.

Instead, Whitmer referenced the ways her administration would continue to work “across the aisle,” following the lead of the Biden administration in calling for “bipartisan unity” with the fascistic Republican Party.

“We spoke with a clear voice in November,” she said. “We want the ability to raise a family without breaking the bank. Strong protections for our fundamental rights to vote and control our own bodies. Leaders who will work across the aisle to solve problems and deliver on the issues that make a real difference in our lives.”

The first proposal Whitmer put forward, ostensibly to address the rising cost of living and the plight of workers “facing the pinch right now,” was a three-part “Lowering MI Costs” plan. It included: repealing the retirement tax, saving some 500,000 retiree households \$1,000 per year; expanding the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC, formerly known as the Earned Income Tax Credit, or EITC) to give 700,000 households a \$3,000 tax rebate; and “Pre-K for all,” an expansion of the Great Start Readiness Program.

To reassure her Republican “colleagues” of her willingness to work together (against the working class), the governor quoted former President Ronald Reagan, who called the Earned Income Tax Credit “the best anti-poverty, the best pro-family, the best job creation measure.”

The next section of the address focused on bipartisan efforts to keep jobs in Michigan. “If we want to play in the global market, we must go everywhere and compete with everyone,” Whitmer said.

She announced the “Make it in Michigan” program, which will expand on bipartisan efforts to attract jobs to

the state by making it a cheap-labor platform able to compete in a race to the bottom for workers by offering low wages and high rates of exploitation. This is already evident in the auto industry, where Big Three companies are continuing a wave of layoffs, while imposing inhumane work schedules and poverty wages.

The shift to production of electric vehicles (EVs), with fewer workers making lower wages, is part of a broader international restructuring of the auto industry. Last year, General Motors announced a \$7 billion investment throughout the state of Michigan for EV production, and Whitmer referenced battery and chip manufacturing as part of the plan to make Michigan workers more “competitive” on the international labor market.

“The good news: competition is in our DNA,” she declared. “We can channel that energy to shore up Michigan as the world’s premier advanced manufacturing destination.”

She continued: “The last few years—with economic shocks in China and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—have demonstrated that a domestic supply of chips and energy is tied to national security. That’s why over the last few weeks I met with business leaders around the globe and across our nation. I told them what Michigan has to offer: Friendly, hardworking people. Unbeatable natural resources. A great quality of life at a good cost of living. But most of all, I told them that we will do what it takes to bring them to Michigan because our young people deserve the best opportunities in the world.”

In the speech, Whitmer touched on “workforce development,” abortion rights, education, public safety and infrastructure.

On workforce development, Whitmer proposed to lower the qualifying age of Michigan Reconnect, a tuition assistance program, from 25 to 21, so as to meet the “60 by 30” goal of having 60 percent of the state’s residents earn a degree or certificate by 2030. Of the million-plus state residents who qualify for Reconnect, only about 110,000 have applied.

Whitmer ran her initial gubernatorial campaign in 2018 with a promise to “fix the damn roads,” a recognition of the state’s crumbling infrastructure that could not be ignored. But the American Society of Civil Engineers gave Michigan’s infrastructure a D+ rating on its 2021 report card, the same rating it gave in

2018.

Since then the state has seen a number of environmental and infrastructure catastrophes, including:

- * The central Michigan dam collapse, which caused historic flooding

- * A tornado that destroyed a community, leaving residents without emergency assistance

- * Industrial pollution of the Huron River

- * PFAS contamination

- * Water shutoffs for thousands in Detroit

- * The Flint water crisis, for which no one has been held accountable.

The social crisis in Michigan, which was not reviewed in the address, is a reflection of the broader state of crisis of American capitalism. Nearly 13 percent of the state’s 9.9 million residents live below the national poverty level. The child poverty rate sits at 17.5 percent, according to the University of Michigan’s “Poverty Solutions.”

Earlier this month, after the state attempted to claw back millions of dollars in unemployment benefits paid out during shutdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic, just 28 out of 1.8 million claims were actually deemed to be fraudulent. Only a judge’s order, temporary at that, has stopped the state from taking action. A lawyer for recipients reports that well over a million claimants, many from the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, are facing massive clawbacks.

While the concocted scandal of fraudulent unemployment claims has been a central talking point of the Republicans in their attacks on jobless assistance and, in 2020, their agitation against temporary lockdowns, the governor did not mention the exposure of their lies in her State of the State address.

She instead closed by reiterating her commitment to working with “anyone who’s serious about solving problems to move Michigan forward,” just as she did in her 2022 gubernatorial debate against her Republican challenger Tudor Dixon.



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