As automakers rake in cash

Michigan Democratic Governor Whitmer delivers gut punch to schools in 2025 budget

Nancy Hanover
3 July 2024

On Monday, July 1, the Democratic Party-dominated Michigan legislature passed its 2025 fiscal year budget, delivering a gut punch to public schools already reeling from the ending of federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER).

Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, who cynically welcomed the agreement as "putting students first," has cut the school aid fund budget by nearly $1 billion, down from $21.5 billion to $20.6 billion. The Democrats, who control all three branches of the state government, have flat-lined per-student public school funding. This amounts to a substantial cut as a result of inflation, which has particularly ravaged school budgets contending with double-digit increases in the cost of transportation, food services and utilities.

This assault compounds the loss of ESSER, under which Michigan schools received $6 billion. The Biden administration has allowed the program to end, catapulting public education into economic crisis across the US. Even prior to the budget deal, 5,100 Michigan teachers were projected to lose their jobs due to the ESSER termination.

The Michigan budget underscores the Democratic Party's national priorities —war and Wall Street. Democratic Governor Whitmer is emerging as a national party leader and has been repeatedly cited as a possible replacement for the crisis-wracked Biden candidacy.

While failing to provide even a modicum of inflation protection to school districts, the budget will drastically cut mental health funding for schools from $328 million to a derisory $25 million. Whitmer, following Biden's approach, is allowing the state's multimillion-dollar mental health initiative, begun in 2021, to expire under conditions where such services are more urgently needed than ever.

In the days before the budget was released, the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) pushed through an early contract settlement with the state's largest school system. Fully aware of Detroit educators' long history of militancy, as well as a recent sickout by Flint teachers and educator protests in Ann Arbor and Wayne-Westland, the DFT bureaucracy's snap contract deal was a preemptive attempt to avert a statewide struggle against layoffs and budget cuts. Detroit is the largest district in the state, with about 53,000 students and 3,200 teachers.

School officials reacted to the statewide cuts with stunned disbelief. "The zero per-pupil foundational increase is unreal to me," said R. J. Webber, superintendent of Northville Public Schools. "Seeing that was awful," he added.

Andrea Oquist, superintendent of Livonia Public Schools, said, "A 98 percent decrease [in mental health and school security support] is hard to fathom right now." Flat Rock Superintendent Andrew Brodie called it "a pretty tough day to be an educator in the state of Michigan."

Webber, fearing cuts to student mental health programs, told *The Metro* earlier this year, "Mental health issues are impacting students in all grades — even children in kindergarten."

L'anse Creuse Schools Superintendent Erik Edoff emphasized, "This really cuts across all socioeconomic lines, all types of backgrounds, and it creates an impact for learning for kids across the entire spectrum now."

State Democrats attempted to defend the cuts by citing a recent reduction in districts' mandatory retirement contributions. While this provides some short-term liquidity to schools, it is not a solution. The Michigan Public School Employees' Retirement system is already underfunded by an estimated $35 billion, essentially creating a time bomb threatening the future livelihoods of thousands of retirees.

The Democrats' priorities could not be clearer. Biden's current military budget allocates $1 trillion for war—those currently being prosecuted in the Middle East and against Russia, and preparations for taking on the Washington's number one economic rival, China. Biden came to Michigan and touted the state as the "Arsenal of Democracy," declaring that Americans had to build more "aircraft carriers

© World Socialist Web Site

and tanks." But schools and social programs have faced unending cuts.

At the state level, virtually unlimited sums have been transferred from public coffers to the automakers and other corporate interests. In addition to feeding the insatiable financial appetites of the wealthy, Democrats are intent on readying Michigan manufacturing for intensified military production and the technological innovations required for war.

To this end, the 2025 budget provides another annual tranche of $500 million to big businesses via the Strategic Outreach and Attraction Reserve (SOAR) Fund, while earmarking numerous other grants and initiatives for corporate interests. A study by *Bridge Magazine* published June 12 revealed that Michigan has already handed $1 billion to automakers for electric vehicle (EV) and battery plant production. Another $1 billion-plus has been pledged to Ford, Gotion Inc, LG Energy Solution, General Motors and Our Next Energy. GM will net about $2.28 billion in tax savings through 2029.

For their part, the teachers' unions operate as political police, keeping educators divided from one another as districts implement cuts and claiming "there is no money"—a patent lie. The bureaucracies of the pro-capitalist American Federation of Teachers (AFT), headed by warmonger Randi Weingarten, and the National Education Association (NEA) operate as a wing of the Democratic Party and function as an ideological battering ram against anti-war and socialist thought among educators.

The Detroit Federation of Teachers' sellout deal, announced June 25, is a case in point. After months of stonewalling educators and barring their input on negotiations, the DFT insisted that teachers vote without time to analyze the 64-page agreement.

The tentative agreement, ratified June 29 by 954-97, with about a third of teachers voting, demonstrated the widespread lack of confidence in the DFT after years of concessions. Everything was done to prevent educators from linking up with their sisters and brothers facing layoffs and cuts in the wake of the ESSER's termination.

The deal abandoned approximately 300 DFT members, whose jobs were axed in anticipation of the end of federal funding. Far from demanding expanded hiring and improved education in the impoverished city, the union congratulated itself for enforcing the district's layoff order.

Additionally, the DFT failed to negotiate an across-the-board pay raise but instead signed onto the district's divide-and-conquer strategy of a patchwork of bonuses. It summarily abandoned the step increases promised to the "COVID cohort" of young educators.

Prior to the contract vote, members of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee (MERFC) issued a call for a "No" vote on the tentative agreement in Detroit and insisted that the defense of public education requires a fight for socialism and against war. The statement explained:

> The DFT brags this contract restores rights of seniority regarding layoffs—rather than demanding no layoffs and insisting on the restoration the jobs of the 300 we have already lost. We know that more layoffs are coming, as the federal government abandons funding schools through ESSER and diverts more than $1 trillion towards war. To properly educate Detroit children, we need smaller class sizes, paraprofessionals, more counselors and mental health professionals and greater resources. This contract is another setback to the defense of jobs—Vote no!
>
> We must link the fight in Detroit with educators battling cuts, layoffs and school closures across the state, the nation and the world. We must draw a line in the sand to defend the right of our students to high quality public education and establish our right to decent wages and working conditions. We will find allies among Wayne State faculty and Chicago teachers, whose contracts are also expiring, and among educators everywhere—from Ann Arbor to New York to Great Britain—opposing the defunding of education. The DFT is not uniting us. They are dividing us from our colleagues everywhere—Vote no!

The MERFC statement added that the DFT and AFT bureaucracies are actively sabotaging a fight by educators because they are allied with Biden and the Democratic Party, who are solely concerned with war funding and Wall Street, not social needs. There can be no defense of public education under these conditions without a fight against imperialist war and capitalism. We urge educators, workers, parents and students to join us today.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site