

Illinois enters 2017 in the midst of an ongoing budget crisis

By Jessica Goldstein
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The state of Illinois enters 2017 in the midst of an ongoing budget crisis that threatens higher education and social services throughout the state.

Since July 2015, Illinois has operated without a full budget, the product of intense divisions in the ruling class over how best to carry out draconian attacks on the living standards of workers and youth in the state.

Illinois has operated since 2015 through a series of court orders and decrees as well as partial and stop-gap budgets. A stop-gap budget which provided minimal funding for higher education and social services expired on December 31, laying the ground for further cuts and layoffs at public colleges and universities and social service providers, some of which may shut down entirely.

Since the budget crisis began, all universities and colleges in Illinois have lost significant amounts of funding, with some public universities struggling to stay open. Including the stop-gap budget which just expired, higher education has received just \$1.6 billion so far for fiscal years (FY) 2016 and 2017. Using the budget allocation for 2015 of \$1.9 billion as a baseline, this has meant an effective cut of 58 percent. Without funding from the state, universities and colleges have relied on their cash reserves and slashed positions in order to keep open.

Several state universities are in dire financial peril. Chicago State University, on Chicago's far south side, is expected to run out of funding in May and is in danger of closing. The university, which primarily serves minority youth from working class backgrounds, has had to lay off over 300 of its faculty and staff members, amounting to 40 percent of its total staff, in order to keep operating on a bare-bones budget. Its accrediting agency has also placed it "on notice" of losing its accreditation over its shaky finances.

Eastern Illinois University in Charleston has laid off 300 faculty and staff. Western Illinois University in

Macomb laid off 147 of its faculty and staff last spring, with another 500 forced to accept furloughs and budget cuts in order to avoid more layoffs. The university also cut several majors, including African American studies, women's studies, religion and philosophy.

Workers at the University of Illinois, the state's largest public university, have been threatened with increases to health care costs that would force workers to retroactively pay increased premiums and force new hires to pay for 100 percent of their health care costs upon retirement.

The loss of Monetary Award Program (MAP) grants for low-income students has affected enrollment in colleges statewide. The agency which awards MAP grants received only \$321 million for FY 2016, around 88 percent of FY 2015 funding, and nothing for FY 2017, including the recently concluded fall semester. Since the cuts to the grants, universities and community colleges have suffered from falling enrollment.

For the fall 2016 semester, average enrollment was down 3 percent at state universities and 4 percent at community colleges. Private colleges and universities, who also receive MAP grant funding from low-income students who attend, were also hit financially, and saw enrollment declines of 2 percent.

Social services have also suffered drastic cuts to their funding in the year and a half since the budget crisis began. Under the stop-gap plan, social services received only 65 percent of FY 2015 funding to cover 18 months of expenses for FY 2016 and the first half of FY 2017.

Just this week, Family Services, an organization that provides resources to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault in Moline, has announced it will lay off staff and cut positions. One non-profit social service agency, Lutheran Social Services, had to close six substance abuse programs, 10 counseling programs and two youth services programs in the past year, laying off hundreds of workers and cutting off service to thousands.

Mental health programs have been shuttered due to the budget impasse, at a time when need for the services throughout the state is rising. A report by the National Alliance for Mental Illness revealed that 38.5 percent of Illinois residents reported poor mental health since around the time that the budget crisis began.

Despite this the Will County Health Department in the southwest suburbs of Chicago was forced to lay off 28 of its psychiatric staff last year. Sinnissippi Centers, which serves municipalities in north central Illinois, had to shut down some of its mental health programs, as has the Centerstone non-profit organization for behavioral health in southern Illinois.

Metropolitan Family Services, a Chicago-based group that serves some of the most vulnerable residents in the Chicagoland area, had to shut down half of its community-integrated living program in December. The program provides stable living arrangements for people recovering from mental illness.

The stop-gap budget had been approved largely to prevent a collapse of higher education and social services from occurring at the high point of the election season and causing a mass mobilization in opposition to both the Democrats and the Republicans. Now with the election over, both parties are closely negotiating over how to formalize the draconian cuts to state governments which are already occurring through continued budgetary inaction.

Republican Governor Bruce Rauner is making his support of any budget contingent on passage of his "Turnaround Agenda," which includes cuts to workers' compensation benefits and pensions, attacks on the collective bargaining rights of unionized workers in the state, limitations on lawsuits against corporations and term limits for state legislators.

The Democrats, who control both chambers of the state legislature, agree in principle with the elements of the Turnaround Agenda. Indeed, they have approved similar measures themselves in the past, including a massive attack on pensions which resulted in former Democratic Governor Pat Quinn's loss to Rauner in the 2014 election.

The Democrats' opposition to Rauner's Turnaround Agenda is based on the recognition that it would represent a significant blow to the unions, who they rely upon for funding and support, and who they employ to suppress working class militancy and opposition to austerity. They are also worried that such a frontal assault would result in massive protests across the state, reminiscent of those that

took place in Wisconsin in 2011 against Republican Governor Scott Walker's sweeping austerity measures and attacks on collective bargaining.

To move forward, workers and youth in Illinois must break with both the unions and the Democrats. Their decades-long assault on the working class has facilitated the rise of right-wing ideologues like Rauner.

The crisis facing the working class in Illinois is part of the international struggle of workers against the global system of capitalism and imperialist war. Workers, students and youth in the state of Illinois must form rank-and-file committees in their workplaces and schools, with the demand to put an end to the bipartisan attacks on their livelihoods and democratic rights. These committees must aim to join in the wider struggle against austerity measures and war in the US and internationally.

Under the incoming Trump administration, with its cabal of millionaires, billionaires and generals, the working class worldwide will face the harshest austerity measures yet as bourgeois politicians are given a green light to enact whatever anti-worker measures they see fit and to prepare for a massive escalation in militarism and war.

In this regard it is notable what the ruling elite are able to find money to fund. Chicago Mayor Rahm Emmanuel, a Democrat and close friend of Rauner, has proposed increased policing and surveillance of the working class population in Chicago in the name of combating the violence that has swept the city since the state budget crisis began. His plan includes the hiring and training of an additional 1,000 officers to the Chicago Police Department, as well as a program to equip all officers with body cameras by the end of the year.

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