

Madison protesters denounce attacks on public workers, social spending

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The eruption of social anger in Wisconsin has brought forward a wide spectrum of workers and youth. Over the past few days tens of thousands have descended on the state capitol building in Madison, occupying the rotunda and surrounding the 100-year-old structure to oppose Governor Scott Walker's attack on public employees and social spending.

The mood on Thursday was one of anger and determination as the state legislature prepared to vote on the Republican governor's proposals, which would strip public sector workers of collective bargaining rights, ban strikes and impose sweeping concessions on the state's 175,000 public employees. Hundreds have camped in during the night inside the capitol, while contingents of teachers, firefighters, high school and college students and other workers and youth from around the state have swelled the numbers outside.

During the morning high school students who walked out of their classes to join their teachers marched to the capitol in lines that stretched for blocks. As they approached the capitol, protesters stopped their chants and cheered the youth who were participating in their first political experience. The scene was repeated again and again throughout the day into the evening, which was topped off with firefighters marching around the capitol led by bagpipe-playing comrades.

Deep social grievances are driving the mass protests. Several of the demonstrators who spoke to the WSWWS referred to high levels of unemployment in the state, the home foreclosure crisis and low wages, including one teaching assistant who was trying to live on \$6,900 a year and will likely be forced to quit university next year. There is universal anger towards efforts to scapegoat public employees for the economic crisis, which demonstrators readily blamed on Wall Street investors.

The protesters were clearly inspired by the revolutionary developments in Egypt and the Middle East. Among the signs present Thursday were: "Walk like an Egyptian" and "Mubarak for Governor."

The militancy of the crowd contrasted sharply with the trade union officials and Democratic Party state legislators who addressed it. They are busily seeking to work out a deal with Governor Walker to dissipate the protests through a compromise bill that would modify the restrictions on union bargaining, while maintaining budget cuts that would slash social programs and cut public sector jobs and workers' living standards.

At the evening rally Wisconsin AFL-CIO President Phil Neuenfeldt made it clear the unions were not against budget cutting in principle. "We understand these are tough times. We know that we have to sit down and work things out. But don't act like a bully to the unions."

The unions, in other words, are demanding the "right" to be involved in overseeing wage-cutting and the rollback of working conditions. The workers and youth demonstrating in Madison, on the other hand, are driven by aspirations for basic social rights—good jobs, health care, housing, and education. This will bring them into conflict with the unions and the entire political establishment.

Chad Baxter, who recently lost his job, told the WSWWS, "I'm here to support the workers. What irritates me is that Governor Walker does not even want to bargain—he wants to dictate to the people."

When this reporter asked Chad what he thought would be the results of "bargaining" with the governor, he acknowledged there would only be further attacks on workers. He then expressed the determination of the protesters, saying, "There should be a new workers' bill of rights. Basic social rights have to be guaranteed

like a living wage, decent benefits and the right to organize. The corporations have taken over the country and nobody has anything but a few at the top—and they want to step over all the people.”

Wendy Prosis, who works at a social service agency for the disabled, added: “Under the disguise of ‘Budget Repair’ Walker is trying to ram this attack on workers down our throats. He has actually refused to use federal money and is exaggerating the size of the deficit in an effort to pit workers against each other, as if teachers and nurses are getting paid huge wages and benefits for doing nothing.”

Chad continued, “All you have is the rich and the working poor who are living from paycheck to paycheck and are never getting anywhere. All this talk about a ‘deficit’ is a lie to further the agenda of the corporations, which are stuffing money into the pockets of both the Republicans and the Democrats. The national debt could be resolved if you taxed all the corporations and executives who shelter their money in the Cayman Islands.

“Obama has conceded to the wealthiest people,” Chad continued. “Ten years of tax cuts to the rich did not create a single job, it only made the privileged even more privileged. Their greed is like a disease. The more digging you do the more you see we live under a system where so much money and power is in the hands of the rich and they use the laws to control everybody.”

Referring to the Egyptian events, he said, “Egypt got everybody riled up. We were watching it on TV and in 13 days they overturned a corrupt government. What happened in Egypt should spread across the planet until the people take control of our governments and countries.”

Melissa Riedel is a student at Edgewood College. She said, “I come from a family of teachers. It’s ridiculous the governor is blaming teachers for problems in the schools. If they keep cutting money for public education then the quality of the schools is going to plummet. This is happening all across the nation. They are taking away the opportunities of people while the rich are benefiting. All you are going to have is the rich and the poor class. We’re on our way to becoming a third world nation like Egypt.”

Drew Hathaway is a manufacturing worker who just lost his job a couple of weeks ago after five years of

service. “There haven’t been any jobs created like they say there have,” he said. “I’ve been putting in 15-20 applications every week and no one calls back.”

“The younger generation is being screwed,” added Melissa.



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