

Protestors in Madison denounce attack on public employees

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The protests of workers and young people against Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's attack on public workers continued on Friday, even as the state Democratic Party and trade union officials worked feverishly to contain the outpouring of social anger during the week.

The mood on Thursday was militant and explosive as the Republican-controlled legislature prepared to vote on the governor's "Budget Repair" bill that would gut public employee bargaining rights, impose a de facto wage cut on workers and slash public spending. Tens of thousands of teachers and other public workers, joined by high school students who walked out of their schools and university students facing a 20 percent increase in tuition, descended on the state capital of Madison, occupying the capitol building and demonstrating around it.

If Republicans had passed the bill, popular anger would have exploded with the potential of a confrontation in the state capitol. Walker has already threatened to deploy the National Guard to put down opposition. In an effort to defuse the situation, Democratic state legislators walked out of the chambers in order to block a vote. On Friday, Walker announced he was postponing the release of a new two-year budget, originally scheduled for next Tuesday, until March 1.

In an interview with local television, Democratic State Senator Jon Erpenbach said the walkout was the only way to slow down the vote. "In the end, what is going to happen is the public employees are going to pay on their pension and pay on their health care. We all know that, they all know that. They're OK with that. They one thing the public employees do not understand is why (Walker) is going after the unions."

While workers have expressed opposition to further concessions, coming on years of stagnating wages and benefit cuts, union officials have announced their willingness to go along with severe givebacks and call off

the protests if Walker allows the unions to retain their seat at the bargaining table.

At a rally on the capitol steps Friday, Marty Beil, the head of the Wisconsin State Employees Union, the largest state workers union, said, "We want to sit down with the governor to address broad challenges. Let me make this clear: we are prepared to implement concessions. Public service is not about money. We're willing to meet the governor half way, but we will not be denied the right to collectively bargain."

In a press conference Thursday night on Capitol Square, Wisconsin Education Association Council President Mary Bell said, "This is not about protecting our pay and our benefits. It is about protecting our right to collectively bargain." Earlier this month Bell agreed to teacher evaluations based on student test scores and performance pay for 98,000 teachers across the state, winning the praise of Republican legislators.

In his remarks to the protestors Friday, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said the unions were "willing to help solve the financial crisis" even as he acknowledged that the deficit was largely manufactured by the governor through granting tax cuts to the rich. Reverend Jesse Jackson hailed the Democratic legislators as heroes and then went on to praise Obama—who has just announced \$1 trillion in budget cuts. The protests in Madison, he said, were "making a good president a great president."

While the Democrats and union officials try to wrap up the protest, workers and young people continue to express their determination to fight. The center of the protest remains the capitol rotunda, which reverberates with the sound of chants, drumbeats and cheering from many who have camped inside for days. Makeshift banners and posters line the chamber walls, with slogans like "Tax the Rich," "Wisconsin workers: unite or die," and "United we stay." Protestors chant, "Hell no, we won't go," "Kill

the Bill.”

Nancy Gillard, an educational assistant, told the WSWS, “The governor wants to take away our rights. They keep giving tax cuts for the rich, saying that’s going to create jobs. Where are the jobs? Walker wants to turn Wisconsin into a Walmart state.”

Rene Sandburg, a school food service worker, added, “He wants us to pay more for our health insurance, which would amount to a 20 percent pay cut. Who can live on that? Not just teachers but support staff are being hit, and we are not even guaranteed full-time work. We work 182 days and get less than \$15,000 a year.”

Nancy added, “If they cut our pay further, I would qualify for BadgerCare (a health insurance program for low-income, uninsured families with children), food assistance and home heating assistance. That would actually be a \$12,000 a year raise for me. Maybe I’d be able to go to the doctor—who I haven’t been able to see in years.”

Rene acknowledged these social services were being cut even as ever greater numbers of unemployed and low-paid workers needed them. Commenting on President Obama’s proposal to cut heating assistance in half, she said, “More people are going to freeze to death in the winter.”

A young UW student, Xia Vang, explained why she was there. “This is great. I went to the Milwaukee public schools and I value education. I’m here because of what my teachers did. Now they want to take away their collective bargaining rights and that would be huge step backwards.”

The 22-year-old Asian student said, “America is supposed to be the greatest democracy. But I think a democracy should not only mean the right to have a voice and freedom of speech but basic human rights like a job and a decent income.”

Kyle, a firefighter from West Bend, north of Milwaukee, told the WSWS, “We haven’t had any manpower cuts, but we have taken a pay freeze. Other departments in our town are not filling positions. Every city is cutting the budget. The tax cuts that are going to the rich are taking money from us.

“Even though firefighters were not included in Walker’s plan to strip workers of collective bargaining rights, we are standing up with all the public employees because we can be next. I heard Walker didn’t go after the police and firefighters because the Milwaukee firefighters union and police association endorsed him for governor last year. Four hundred firefighters came here

from all over the state to join this fight.”

David Hoppe is a retired Madison teacher. He said, “I was in the 1975 strike of the Madison teachers. We stayed out eleven days in minus-35-degree weather on behalf of education and our kids. They were trying to take away our index, which improved wages for higher seniority teachers and wanted to put us back to starting pay. The strike also had a tone of merit pay in it, where the school authorities wanted to pay more to the teachers they ‘valued.’ It was a bitter strike.

“I compare what Walker is doing to the militarization of the workforce. They are going to tell you what to do, and you better damn well do it, like the Marines or the Army. They want to break you down and make you obedient. If they tell teachers you’re going to have to work from 1 p.m. to eight at night, and come in on weekends, well you better do it.

“I don’t like the way he is trying to win the support of the police and firefighters. It’s as if he wants to build up a Praetorian Guard to protect him against popular opposition. So far, it’s not working, however.

“They say there is a horrible debt crisis—this is a pack of lies. Every year of my life they tell you they are broke, there’s never any money. There is never a negotiation without those statements. All the while the top two percent of the country are doing better than ever.

“In Madison, 50 percent of the public school students qualify for free or reduced price lunch. But when do they ever talk about the needs of the low-income people and the poor?”

“A lot of us had hope in Obama. No Child Left Behind is a disaster. But the wars are going on, and war leaves all children behind. The rich people’s kids will always go to college. Their kids will be the CEOs and managers—it’s sickening.

“Mary Bell spoke two times yesterday. They always give her the mic to say how much they are fighting for teachers. What she didn’t say is that the Wisconsin Education Association just accepted merit pay.”



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