

The International Socialist Organization gushes over unions' role in Wisconsin

David Walsh
23 February 2011

The International Socialist Organization (ISO) has reacted to the explosion of working class anger in Wisconsin by encouraging illusions in the trade unions' willingness and ability to resist Republican Governor Scott Walker's attack on public sector workers.

The events in Wisconsin are tremendously significant. Walker's assault on pay, benefits and pensions, and the right to bargain over anything but wages, has evoked a deep class response. More than 200,000 teachers, government workers, firefighters and industrial and construction workers, accompanied by large numbers of college and high school students, have rallied in Madison and other towns and cities. The call for a general strike would no doubt find powerful support.

The protesters are not simply reacting to Walker's vicious measure. Accumulated experiences and sentiments are at work here, which go well beyond Wisconsin's borders. Those demonstrating speak for millions in the US.

In Wisconsin we see the working class beginning to take its place once again at the center of American political life, after decades in which its struggles and interests were suppressed, above all, by its "representatives" in the AFL-CIO and other unions.

The unions' role has not changed in Wisconsin. The various officials—including Mary Bell, president of the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC), and Marty Beil, executive director of AFSCME Council 24 (Wisconsin State Employees Union)—have made clear their acceptance of the concessions demanded by Walker, as long as their right to negotiate and help implement those cuts is not taken from them.

As early as February 17, WEAC's Bell told reporters, "This is not about protecting our pay and our benefits. It is about protecting our right to collectively bargain."

In a statement released to the press the following day, Beil of AFSCME Council 24 explained bluntly, "We are prepared to implement the financial concessions proposed to help bring our state's budget into balance, but we will not be denied our God-given right to join a real union." How an organization that accepts the devastation of its members' wages, benefits and pensions qualifies as a "real union" is a question that Beil and other union officials leave unanswered.

A mass explosion of the sort that has unfolded in Wisconsin is the last thing in the world that AFSCME, WEAC and the other unions in the state wanted, much less encouraged. As recently as the weekend of February 12-13, AFSCME Council 24 made clear it had nothing but a strenuous lobbying effort in mind: "We are meeting with legislators and we would strongly encourage all of you and your members to reach out to their State Senators." The council envisioned February 15 and 16 as "lobby days at the Capitol."

Things then threatened to get out of hand, with the entry of tens of thousands onto the scene. Establishment figures such as Richard Trumka of the national AFL-CIO and the Rev. Jesse Jackson were shuttled in to impress the workers with demagoguery, if possible, and stifle the mass movement. In a move to wind down the protests Bell ordered teachers back to work this week—which teachers defied on February 21—while Jackson has told high school students to return to their classrooms.

One receives a dramatically different—and deliberately falsified—picture, however, at the ISO's Socialist Worker.org. The ISO waxes enthusiastic about the public workers' unions, and even the national AFL-CIO, attempting to provide these officials with credibility in the eyes of students and young people looking for a way to fight. In this manner, the ISO is contributing to the effort to bring the Wisconsin struggle under control.

In articles posted February 17 and 18, Lee Sustar, labor editor of *Socialist Worker*, outlined the group's attitude toward the Wisconsin events.

Typically, Sustar presents the union leaders as *obliged to resist*, because of the anti-working class measures pushed by Walker and the Republicans. In "Wisconsin Unions Turn Up the Heat," February 17, Sustar asserts, "Public-sector union leaders have little choice but to take a stand—Walker's proposals could literally bust their unions."

As though the threat of destruction would force the unions to adopt a policy of serious struggle.

On the contrary, while it may encourage a new level of public bluster by Bell, Beil and company, the current attacks will drive the Wisconsin union officialdom *farther to the right*, as they try desperately to work out an arrangement with Walker, with the

help of the state's Democrats. There is a class antagonism between the workers and the union officials, which the Wisconsin governor's offensive will only widen.

Sustar cites the remarks of union leaders at a public rally February 16 without criticism, and simply comments, "Several labor officials who addressed the rally focused on a simple demand—that Walker sit down and talk to unions, rather than try to steamroller them. ... Wisconsin AFL-CIO President Phil Neuenfeldt also said in an interview that labor's objective with the protest was to pressure Walker to negotiate. Earlier, speaking to the thousands of union members and supporters, Neuenfeldt sounded the basic theme of solidarity that motivated workers to turn out from across the state."

Does Sustar agree with the strategy of "pressuring Walker to negotiate"? Apparently—he raises no objections and, after all, Neuenfeldt "sounded the basic theme of solidarity..." How pathetic. Sustar tries to make heroes out of garden variety union bureaucrats, whose profession is betrayal and class collaboration. He fails to mention that the Wisconsin unions, busy 'turning up the heat,' had already accepted Walker's concession demands on health care and pensions.

In "Class War in Wisconsin," February 18, Sustar spelled out the ISO perspective even more clearly.

In this article, it should be noted, Sustar gives a stamp of approval to the stunt pulled by the Democratic state senators who left Wisconsin to prevent the passage of Walker's measure, provide themselves with a bit of credibility and, most importantly, give the unions and the politicians in Madison time to come up with some rotten agreement.

Our ISO author views the Democrats' maneuver as a legitimate part of the mass, popular protest, merely complaining that the Democrats had to be pushed into taking action. So Sustar writes that "Democratic state Sen. Chris Larson's exit from the Capitol was assisted by dozens of protesters who blocked his office with a sit-in midday February 17." Hours later, a larger sit-in took place outside Larson's office, because, "Although word had circulated that the Senate Democrats were safely out of state, protesters weren't taking any chances." This is openly sowing illusions in one of the two major big business parties in the US.

Again, in this piece, Sustar attempts to lull his readers to sleep by encouraging the illusion that under the changed circumstances the Wisconsin unions and the national AFL-CIO will *have to fight*: "Because Walker's plan poses a grave threat to the very existence of public-sector unions, top labor officials are being drawn into the fight."

Sustar notes the presence of American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Randi Weingarten and the AFL-CIO's Trumka in Wisconsin. He continues: "But Trumka and Weingarten aren't coming to Madison to lead the movement so much as to catch up to it. Given the danger to labor posed by Walker's program, international union leaders should have joined their Wisconsin affiliates from the beginning in calling

on union members far and wide to converge on the state in a show of solidarity."

What world is Sustar living in? Trumka and Weingarten came to Madison to "catch up" to the movement only in order to strangle it, if they could. As for Sustar's retroactive complaint that the AFT and AFL-CIO leaders hadn't come to Wisconsin rapidly enough, any honest and thinking worker would want these highly-paid operatives of the ruling elite to stay away as far as possible!

Sustar's method is deeply dishonest. He presents the largely spontaneous popular eruption as though it were the work of the Wisconsin AFL-CIO and teachers' union, using consciously vague language to create that impression. For example, when he writes, "Anyone who participates in the rallies is struck by how the unions see themselves as fighting on behalf of the entire working class," who is the ISO leader talking about? Bell and Beil and Weingarten and Trumka? Or rank and file teachers and firefighters and construction workers?

Frankly, the explosion of protest in Madison and elsewhere in Wisconsin is every bit as unpalatable to the AFL-CIO and the AFT as the mass protests in Cairo were to the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation, and potentially just as threatening.

The American working class has suffered job losses in the millions, the destruction of social programs, the wholesale ripping up of contractually-agreed pensions and benefits, an overall decline in living standards—all with the cooperation and complicity of the AFL-CIO, AFT, UAW and Teamsters.

The current predicament of the US working population as a whole, its paralysis up to this point in the face of relentless attacks by employers and government, can be traced in large measure to the worthlessness of the official "labor movement," which has not lifted a finger to defend its membership while union officials remained fat and content.

But for a Sustar, "The one-sided class war is over. Unions in Wisconsin are fighting back." Nonsense. The working class has begun to mobilize itself. And as soon as it does so, it comes up against not only the Republicans and Democrats, but trade union organizations dedicated to the defense of capitalism.

Sustar is not a Rip Van Winkle, who has been asleep for twenty years and doesn't know what to make of the current situation. Nor is he a naïf. The ISO defends the unions as part of its efforts, as an organization rooted in sections of the better-off middle class seeking to improve conditions for themselves, to subordinate workers to the existing social order.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact