

Ohio workers protest attack on collective bargaining

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Over 1,000 people packed the Ohio Statehouse in Columbus on Tuesday to protest against a bill currently under consideration by the Senate that would eliminate collective bargaining for 40,000 state workers and reduce the bargaining power of firefighters and teachers, among others. Protesters filled the building's galleys and assembly rooms, with only standing room left for those attending the hearings on Senate Bill 5 (SB5).

Further protests are expected on Thursday, when the Insurance, Commerce and Labor Committee will continue to take testimony on the proposed legislation. The outpouring of opposition to SB5 comes alongside large protests in Wisconsin, where tens of thousands have come out to demonstrate over the past three days against a bill that would impose drastic pay cuts on public sector workers and end their right to strike.

Should Ohio's 27-year-old collective bargaining law for state employees be overturned through the passage of SB5, after the expiration of existing contracts the government will be free to impose compensation and benefit cuts as it sees fit. In addition, local government employees, such as teachers, firefighters, will lose all seniority-based pay increases and job security, as well as the right to negotiate over health insurance. While their collective bargaining would not be eliminated, local governments would have the right to abrogate contracts in the event of an "emergency." In addition, thousands of employees would be largely stripped of any ability to combat attacks on their compensation, as public employers would have the right to hire permanent replacements in the event of a strike.

The effort by Ohio's Republican-majority government to win passage of SB5 is part of a broader, anti-democratic attack on workers' rights being carried out, in different forms, by Republican and Democratic

administrations across the US. In New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Iowa, Indiana, and Tennessee there are efforts underway to drastically curb employee bargaining power, while in California and New York, Democratic governors are working to impose historically unprecedented cuts in public employees' wages and benefits, as well as reductions in social services and public education.

In Ohio, as elsewhere, a concerted effort is being made to blame state employees for the fiscal crisis facing the state, which is facing an \$8 billion shortfall over the next two years.

This fact was not lost on Mark Hill, a junior high school math teacher protesting at the Statehouse, who told the *Columbus Dispatch*, "Public employees didn't start or cause the budget deficit. Politicians did. Don't balance the budget on the backs of public employees."

In portraying government workers as the source of the problem, politicians seek to divide the working class and divert growing anger over declining living standards away from the growing wealth of big business and the super-rich.

Proponents of the measures, including bill author Republican State Senator Shannon Jones and Republican Governor John Kasich, have made it clear that their aim is to destroy the ability of government workers to defend their job security, wages and health and pension benefits.

"I am doing this because I want to give the government flexibility and control over its workforce," Jones said on Tuesday. Last week, a spokesman for the Governor extolled SB5 for the role it would play in "reducing cost of government" and improving "Ohio competitiveness"—i.e. the state's attractiveness to big business seeking a low-cost labor force.

Numerous local school board representatives and

Ohio mayors have come out in support of SB5 because they see it as a means to impose even further concessions on employees who have already experienced years of givebacks. Van Keating, who works for the Ohio School Boards Association as a negotiator, told the *Middletown Journal*, “It would certainly give a great deal of flexibility to boards making cuts.”

This position, which was put forth by numerous officials speaking at Tuesday’s hearing in Columbus, elicited angry comments from the crowds inside the Statehouse. Remarks by Jones, who was booed when she went up to testify, were repeatedly interrupted by shouts. One woman, who was escorted out for disrupting the proceedings, yelled, “Kick them out! Kick the rich [expletive] out!” as she was being removed, reports the *News Leader*. Presiding officials had a difficult time containing outbursts in the heated atmosphere inside the Statehouse.

Workers protesting at the hearing made clear that they understand that SB5 is intended to dismantle whatever remains of decent-paying jobs and benefits for public employees. They expressed their belief that the intention of the bill’s proponents was to roll back the clock decades.

Tommy Sue Adam, a Newark City school bus driver, told WBNS-10TV, “That’s my living. I mean if they take this away they can do whatever they want with wages, healthcare, and arbitration, mediation, whatever.”

Chris Weaver, a Youngstown firefighter, told the Associated Press that, given that emergency personnel are already not allowed to strike, “when you take away collective bargaining, we have no rights at all.”

At a Tuesday press conference in Columbus called by workers opposed to SB5, Jean Fightmaster, a retired state employee, warned, “We’re not going back to the 20th century. We’re going back to the 19th century. These are the stories that Charles Dickens wrote about, those kind of employers. If you allow this to happen, what comes next?”

As speakers pointed out, public employees have already made significant concessions in recent years. Unions have worked alongside management to impose givebacks under the mantra of “shared sacrifice.”

“K.J. Watts, a Lancaster firefighter and paramedic, said his union helped the city save more than \$1 million

by agreeing to reopen a contract—freezing wages and cutting benefits,” noted the *Columbus Dispatch*.

Ohio recently won \$400 million in Race to the Top education funding, a program promoted by the Obama administration in order to get public schools to agree to a series of right-wing demands in return for an inadequate amount of federal funding. This includes the agreement by the teachers’ unions to accept the imposition of merit-based pay for teachers, the expansion of testing-based accountability standards, and the expansion of charter schools.

Public employees were endlessly told that it was necessary to accept such demands in order to avoid an educational catastrophe in the schools, which are facing severe shortfalls. SB5, however, makes clear that the passage of Race to the Top legislation marked the beginning in a new stage in the frontal assault on schoolteachers, and public employees more generally.

Ohio Governor Kasich has made clear that he is determined to continue this assault regardless of the sentiments of the state’s working people. He has said that if SB5 fails to win passage, he will incorporate a ban on all public employee strikes into his upcoming state budget proposal.

While Democratic Party politicians generally favor working with the unions to impose the budget cuts—rather than seeking to destroy them outright—Kasich made it clear the Democrats welcomed his attack on public workers.

In a speech to the Ohio Newspaper Association earlier this week Kasich said, “I can promise you that big-city mayors favor what I’m doing. They want this. They’re not going to tell you that, but they want this.”



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